



"Is Calisto bringing the food?"

"Yeah, of course."

Ciela caught the Frisbee with right hand, and tossed it back at Rolf, who had to run to get it. He dived, his arm outstretched, and just barely caught it before hitting the ground. He slid several feet on the grass, and then leapt to his feet, grinning wildly as he waved the disc above his head.

Marionetta, who was sitting in the shade with a book, always seemed to be paying enough attention to know when to clap. Rolf grinned at her, waved, and tossed the Frisbee back.

Anita was not here with them today. She had, following the events of their adventure in the fantasy world of Luca, decided she had spent far too much time in the colony and needed to dedicate a little more time for study.

They had decided to take their day off and have a little party out in a nearby field. Lovely natural flowers sprang up all around them in a wide variety of different colors. Red, yellow, and Blue being most prominent among them.

The party, however, would not be much without food. And, of course, Callisto being Callisto, insisted that he would prepare it all on his own."

"He has this mindset that he should just do everything himself." Ciela complained. "Like, he can't ever ask anyone else for help." She would much rather have helped Callisto cook than wait out here waiting.

"Well, he has to." Rolf answered, as the Frisbee came flying out of his hand and soared straight at her. "Solaire wouldn't want anything to do with him if he had to ask for help on every little thing."

"Where is Solaire, anyway?" Ciela asked curiously, as the Frisbee met her fingers. She easily caught it, spinning around on her heel. "I haven't seen him in weeks."

"Doing whatever it is he does, I guess," Rolf said. "He's certainly not out and about much, is he?"

She had slowly become accustomed to nearly every face in the colony purely due to running into the same faces all the time. She had never seen Solaire out in public unless something was amiss.

"He's trying to salvage this colony," Ciela said, as she threw the Frisbee back. "Dad can't really do what he needs to do with what he's given."

She had recently learned that a public works project to create a supply line between the Capital and their colony had been carefully planned, organized, and prepared for by her Father and the other governors of the colony, only for the Capital Government to shut it all down before any progress on it could be made. And then Solaire got the funding and people to handle it all in a matter of weeks.

It was a strange relationship. The arm of the government, her Dad and his people, were still present in the community. They wrote laws, organized public events, and handled a few other civic duties. But it was Solaire and his Sons of the Sun that were really, really got things done. Ciela was beginning to think, more and more, that her father had no real power. Solaire was the true leader of the community in all but name. Because of him, this community thrived.

It was an amazing feeling that she could stand out in the open like this and expect to not get attacked by monsters. Such an amazing feeling to go cruising around after dark in Calisto's car, going wherever and doing whatever they wanted. They could never have done that if they were living in the city, where people were encouraged to spy on their neighbors and report them to the authorities. Out here, the world was open to them.

She caught the Frisbee again, catching another sly look at Marionetta. She was still looking at her book rather intently. Ciela, as a joke, threw the Frisbee straight at her.

Marionetta yelped as it slammed straight into the book, causing it to fall out of her hands to the ground. "That wasn't funny, Ciela!" She

shouted. "Now you've gotten it all dirty..."

Some distance away, they could hear a car coming through the path in the trees. "Oh, he's here!" Ciela said brightly.

Callisto was here, but he wasn't alone. He waved to them as he stepped out of the car. Baskets of food and little tables followed him out, floating in midair. Anita lazily crossed her legs as filtered out. She was sitting on the roof of the car, looking completely at east.

"Your boyfriend wouldn't let me be, Ciela!" Anita called down to her. "You might want to have a word with him."

Ciela scowled playfully at him. "Is this true, Callisto?"

"Of course not." He said. "She wanted to come with me."

Anita slammed her foot against the metal of the car, causing magical sparks bursting from the blow. "I did not!"

"Careful, you'll damage it!" He said in alarm, suddenly agitated. Ciela giggled. Him and his cars.

It was not long afterward that she found herself in the driver's seat of his car, her hands on the wheel. Callisto on her right, patiently correcting her every misstep. "No, that's no right." He said. "You don't want to turn that on during the day, it'll drain your battery and you won't be able to go anywhere once it gets dark..."

She nodded intently, trying to follow along with everything. She was getting frustrated: She had never even seen a car until she was fourteen, and learning to drive one was another matter entirely. She was getting better though, at least. And it didn't hurt that she had such a great teacher...

She managed to drive around for a bit, albeit slowly, but after about an hour of that Callisto suggested they take a break. She quickly agreed, and they came back to their party ground to find the food all set out for them on little tables.

"We can't eat all of this ourselves, Callisto." She said, poking his cheek. "It's way too much."

"Is it?" He asked. "Well, maybe we should invite more people then."

"Don't be ridiculous." Ciela told him, as she tugged at his arm. "Who would we even invite? No one would want to come near Anita, you don't really have any friends, and everyone is terrified of Marionetta."

She cast a look behind her, suddenly worried that Marionetta had been listening in. She hadn't. She was talking to Rolf about something, but unable to meet his eyes. Ciela almost rolled her eyes.

"We could have some of the men drop by." Callisto suggested, wrapping his arm around her as he led her to the table where various plates and silverware lay waiting for them to use. "They could use a little cheering up."

"Cheering up?" Ciela repeated. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Well..." He lowered his voice so that Ciela had to lean into him. "It concerns the Host."

The Host. The name continued to mean nothing to her, and she had never heard anyone else other than Callisto utter it. "The Host?" She repeated blankly. "What about him? Can you tell me?"

"It's not for me to say." He said. "You will meet with him someday."

"Why not now?" She asked, a little frustrated. She pulled away from him to grab a plate. "Do you not trust me?"

"Quite the opposite." He assured her. "But he does not want to meet with you yet."

"Why not?"

"Again, I can't tell you that." He said. "The long and short of it is, though, that we want you to be happy living here, so we're giving you the opportunity to settle in."

She slapped a bit of mashed potato onto her plate irritably. "I don't understand the secrecy." She said. "I don't like being kept in the

dark, Calisto. I swear, when my birthday rolls around and you don't take me to see him..."

"I will." He assured her. "That was the date we agreed on, before you were brought here."

She frowned at him. "My... dad brought me here." She said. "Are you saying he has something to do with this?"

"Well... not really." He admitted. "We just let him know what situation you were in and he got you out of there. Did you really think the government would have let him know that his daughter was being locked in an underground prison? Even your Mother didn't know."

She looked up at him, shocked. "She- She didn't?" She asked. Suddenly all those lonely nights trying to bring herself to hate her Mother surfaced in her memory. She set down the plate, and hung her head over the table.

Callisto wrapped his arms around her. "Shhh." He said. "It'll be fine. You'll be together again; I just know it."

She let him hug her, unable to overcome her own guilt. She had spent the past several months with strong bitter feelings towards her Mother for failing to show even a sliver of concern for her only daughter, to the point where the father she had never met had to step in.

"I can't believe it..." She whispered. "She really didn't know?"

"They didn't tell her because they knew she would step in and discover the truth." He said gently. "She still thinks you're with the Slayers... but she knows you're here."

"She... does?"

She took his hand. "Callisto, would it be possible... could I see her?" She could see it already. For the first time since before she was born, they would all be together again. As a family. She wondered

what it would be like, what they would do together, what they would talk about. The possibilities seemed endless.

He smiled. "Someday." He promised her. "When we accomplish our goals, there won't be a reason for you to be apart anymore."

"Callisto..." She had to know. "Are you going to help me.... Accomplish my dream?"

His body felt so warm against hers. Despite the intense emotions she was feeling, she felt as if she could stay here forever.

"Yes." He said. "We will make your wildest dreams come true."

She broke out into a smile, the widest she ever had, and kissed him, more passionately than she ever had before.

The plates in front of them began to rattle back and forth, causing them both to jump, pulling away from each other.

"You are not alone here, you know." Anita sniffed, holding out her empty plate in front of her. "Show some decency."

The couple merely looked at each, laughed, and whispered 'later' into each other's ear before they resumed piling up their plates. Although she laughed and joked along with Anita and the rest, the conversation she had with Callisto was still on her mind.

She believed him. She didn't know why, or how, but somehow... just waiting for a little while longer would lead her to where she needed to be.

She ate way too much that day. She was honestly feeling a little bloated by the time the sun was setting and it was time to clean up.

Thankfully, unlike most witches, Anita was more than willing to use her powers to help them with the task. They sat around and talked as the dishes cleaned themselves off, the remaining food was put away in little bowls for later, and their trash disposed of itself. It was over in a couple of minutes.

"Do we really have to go home now?" Ciela asked. "I kind of want to stay out here longer." It was a very lovely, peaceful atmosphere.

"At night?" Anita asked. "I do not even like leaving my library after dark, to be honest with you."

Rolf grinned at her as he leaned back against the tree he was sitting against. "Are you scared of the dark?" He asked her. "Who would have thought- "

An apple fell from the tree and conked him on the head. "Silence." Anita sniffed. "There are many dangerous creatures lurking in these woods. It is best to exercise caution."

"That's right." Ciela said. "You don't actually live in the colony, do you?"

"Do not get any ideas, my friend." Anita said. "I have no intention of moving here. I am, after all, on my pilgrimage. I am not unwilling to help the colony prosper, but I must think of Karuma's needs as well."

Ciela stared back at her, determined not to back down. "But what about- "

"That's enough." Callisto said shortly, placing his hand on Ciela's thigh. "I will not have this sort of talk today."

"Fine." She said shortly. She thought it best to change the subject. "Anita, did you help with the cookies? I noticed they all had little roses on them..."

They spent a little time talking about the icing of all things as the sun set around them. As much as she was loathe to admit it, it was time to go home.

"Can you walk Marionetta home, Rolf?" She asked him. "Callisto and I... Uh, need to talk."

"That's' a weird way of putting it." Rolf said. "But sure."

He walked over to Anita, who was carefully handling the leftovers and stacking them up in Calisto's car. "Just be sure to take care of the food first, you two." She said. "It would be a shame if it all went to waste."

"We're not that irresponsible!" Ciela told her. "Have a little faith!"

"Hmph." Anita said, as she turned away from them to double check the stack of food in the car. Satisfied that it was arranged in a reasonable way, the trunk door slammed shut.

"What are you doing tonight, Anita?" Ciela asked her as she came over to them.

"Going to sleep, I think." Anita said. "I'm exhausted."

Solaire did have her working a lot, Ciela thought sympathetically. She was well rewarded, but it was a bit much for one person to handle. Although it was true she could get certain tasks done very quickly, it was also exhausting for her to do on a regular basis.

"We really need to start finding new magi." Ciela told her. "You're being way overworked."

Anita shook her head. "No, I do not mind." She said. "I need to keep my powers sharp. I feel as if I get worn out too easily, truth be told..."

"Because you don't let yourself rest!" Ciela said. "Look, next time Solaire comes around asking you to do whatever, tell him to go away."

Callisto was on her side. "Solaire has told me that he feels like you're actually doing too much for the Colony." He said. "He appreciates it, of course, but he has told me that you think you're working yourself too hard."

"So he too thinks I am weak?" She asked, her hair suddenly billowing behind her. They had accidentally struck a nerve.

"I never said that." Callisto said patiently. "Solaire is the strongest person I know, and even he takes a break sometimes."

"A break?" She scoffed. "I will be better than that. You will see."

She lifted off the ground and took off, without looking down at them.

Ciela watched her go, suddenly feeling very sad. "She's not being herself." She murmured to Callisto. "Something is seriously wrong."

"But what?" He asked her. "What could it possibly be?"

Ciela looked at the ground, deep in thought. "I wish I knew." She said at last. "I feel like she's... hiding something from me." Ciela shook her head. "Whatever it is, I hope she figures it out." She said at last. "I just wish... wish she'd talk to me about it."

Callisto smiled at her. "Why don't we drop by her place tomorrow?" He suggested. "The first thing tomorrow morning."

She smiled back. "Yeah, that might work." She said enthusiastically. "Hey, we could have breakfast at her place. We still have plenty of food."

"Now that's a plan." He said approvingly. "You want to drive yourself home?"

"In the dark?"

He had to show her how the battery worked. "You don't want to use an excessive amount of power after it gets dark." He told her. "This is a solar powered vehicle, so it can only charge during the day. You really don't want to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no power."

She nodded vigorously. "But I'll need the headlights to see... right?"

"Just make sure you only keep on whatever you need." He told her. "Don't keep the lights on when you don't need them."

She nodded. It was a bit difficult for her to figure out which knob was which, but soon she was rolling through the trees like a pro. Or at least, someone who know what they were doing.

"Don't go off the path." Callisto warned her. "You're too inexperienced to handle off road."

She nodded, obediently doing as he asked. She knew better than to try and handle more than she was able.

They rolled past the trees and into the residential area. There were still kids out and about, waving little light sticks above their heads.

She smiled as she watched them.

"Keep your eyes on the road, Ciela...."

She turned her head back.

They came to a stop in front of house, right next to her own car which she had hardly touched.

"Maybe I'll actually try to drive it there tomorrow." She told him, leaning up against him. "You still owe me a race!"

"And you're still too inexperienced." He told her. "Once you start getting places without my help, maybe I'll think about it..."

"You're no fun..."

They spent over a half an hour saying goodnight. Ciela could not get enough of him, but eventually she felt her eyes flutter with exhaustion.

"I'm going to bed." She yawned, as she opened the door to the car. "Say hi to Solaire for me..."

She passed out the instant her head hit the pillow. She was completely exhausted. She had not spent so much time with friends in forever. Since before she was sentenced to life in prison, she thought.

She fell asleep rather quickly. The bright, orange light fell over her before she knew it. She lay still, refusing to even open her eyes. How was it dawn already?

She generally hated not getting up when the sun was out, but last night had worn her out so much that she did not even want to crawl out of her bed. She lay there for a couple of more minutes before finally sitting up.

She yawned, and tried to wake herself up with stretches. She felt terrible. It felt as if she had hardly gotten any sleep at all.

She cast her eye to the window to see how far the sun had risen.

It was still dark out.

In her shock, she accidentally fell off the side of the bed. She scrambled back up, looking around wildly. There were three windows in her room. Two of them were pitch black, but one...

There was a strange, orange glow coming from a window. She had mistaken it for sunlight, but it clearly wasn't.

She approached the window cautiously, her mind unable to place the strange phenomenon. What exactly was she looking at?

She peered through the window to try to find the source of light. It was not right outside. It was far, far, above. In the sky.

A ray of orange light was streaking across the sky. It shimmered in a sort of wave, back and forth above her. It went on and on and on in the distance.

She quickly got dressed and leapt out the window, clambering onto the roof. She turned around and saw that the Ray continued in the other direction as well.

"What is this...?" She muttered.

Her first thought was to go get Anita, but she knew that first and foremost she would have to let her Dad know.

She realized very quickly that he already knew that something was wrong. She found a note laying on the kitchen counter.

Ciela,

Do what you must.

-Charles

She crumpled the paper in her hand. He could have at least woken her up before leaving. But at least she knew she had permission to fight this time.

But against what?

She had to know, but there was only one way to find out.

It was rather cold, so she chose to wear one of Calisto's heavy jackets. It did not fit her, really, but she loved how warm it was. It smelled nice too.

She hoped he was okay.

She stepped outside onto the front porch and got her first glimpse of what exactly was wrong.

A freakish dog covered by rotting flesh paced back and forth in front of the house. Its fangs were long, sharp, and bloody. Some of it was dripping off its fangs and onto their lawn.

"Hey, little doggy." Ciela said, as she stepped down the wooden steps, her feet clicking with every step. "Where do you live? Are you lost?"

It pounced on her immediately after she took that last step onto the grass, but her hands shot forward, wrapping around its jaws, and gave it a brutal twist. Its head completely popped off, but it did not stop struggling. Its head tried to bite and snap at her arms as its body ran in circles around in front of her, trying to find where she had gone.

She threw the head straight at it, and the bones in the neck embedded themselves into the body of the beast in ways they shouldn't have. It staggered around, clearly in pain, as Ciela raised her leg.

She kicked at it, sending it flying towards a nearby tree, and it splattered as it came into contact.

She looked at its remains, satisfied that it was not able to come back from such a savage beating. "An otherworld creature." She said. "So that means...'

She looked up at the light above her. It meant nothing to her. "Anita should know something about it." She thought.

She almost started walking, before remembering just how far it was. The car would be a better option. So she changed direction

completely to walk to the side of her house, where her car had been left all this time.

Three green, hairy creatures were laughing and bouncing on the top of the car. A fourth was sitting in the driver's seat, cackling insanely as it smashed buttons on the dashboard. The lights were flickering on and off.

"Hey!" Ciela snapped. "Get away from there!"

The creatures, whatever they were, ignored her and continued slamming their filthy hands into the side of the car, causing little dents to appear along the side of the car...

"That was a GIFT!"

She lurched towards them with frightening speed, but without missing a beat the creatures leapt up at her. The long, thin fingers of one stretched towards her eyes, clearly meaning to poke them out.

She smacked it aside instead, and it went skidding across the grass. The other two spit at her, and she gagged. They smelled terrible.

In fact, it was more than a bad smell. She realized. It was making her feel faint.

Despite that, she was determined to not let them get away. Two more strikes were all she needed to send them flying, and then the last one...

Her mind was hazy. It was messing with her senses. Her hand burst through the window, shattering into pieces as she wrapped her hand wrapped around it's throat. She turned around and threw it away, as far as she could.

She staggered away, taking rasping breaths. She had accidentally torn her arm by jabbing it through the window. It was nothing serious, but she was much more worried about the strange smell she had inhaled. Could it have been toxic? She certainly wasn't feeling well.

She took a moment to compose herself. She lay some distance away from the car, recovering from the ordeal. She was feeling better in less than fifteen minutes.

But the smell around the car had not gone away. She quickly realized that if she stuck around, she would just get sick again. She had no choice but to walk after all.

"Dad couldn't be bothered to wake me up for THIS?" She murmured.

As frustrating as this was, she was worried about everyone else. Calisto in particular. What exactly had happened out here? Who was doing this?

And where could she go first to answer these questions? Anita's place was too far. Without the car, it was out of the question. And besides... she was probably more than aware that something was horrifically wrong already and was in the colony.

But where?

Ciela stepped onto the path, not entirely sure where she was going just yet. Where exactly was everyone? If Dad had made it out okay, surely everyone else had...

There was someone waiting in the middle of the road. She stopped, staring at it with a wary eye.

It was a large, humanoid creature sitting hunched over on the path. Its skin was granite gray and its eyes were wide and staring. Its limbs were long, far longer than a person's would be, and far more muscular.

"Excuse me!" Ciela called out to it, raising her finger. "Um, hello?"

It looked up at her. "Human." It rasped. "Human, human, human, human, human...."

"Yes, yes, that's what I am." She said impatiently. "Could you move?"

It reached out its hand to her, and made as if to grab her.

Ciela punched it. The blow sent it sprawling onto it's back. It did not move again.

She stood over it, looking down at it with contempt. "Please."

The restaurant. She thought as she walked along the path. The restaurant would be the place to go. Surely there was someone there who could help her.

...

Anita placed a finger on her forehead, deep in thought. "Could you repeat the question, please?"

The Sphinx smiled at her as it obliged. "I am something that lives by being fed, but dies when I take a drink."

Anita tapped her cheek. "I can think of several things that fit that description." She said. "Too many, in fact. Desert creatures like yourself, for instance..."

The Sphinx kept smiling. "You are stalling, child."

"No, no, I would never do that." Anita told her smoothly. "I simply want to clear something up with you."

"Oh?"

"I want you to let her go now."

The girl laying under the Sphinx's foot gave out a whimper. The Sphinx cruelly twisted its claws deeper into her back. "Do you take me for a fool, disciple of Karuma?" It asked. "We are playing a game, you and I. We are engaged in a competition to see which of us is the better, and if you do not answer the question correctly- "

"Fire."

The Sphinx froze. It suddenly began to look shifty and evasive. "That is... um... not correct..."

"Get off her." Anita said coolly. "Before I lose my patience with you."

It gave one last look at the girl under her before bouncing off, doubtlessly to harass someone else.

"Are you alright?" Anita asked the girl, as she helped her stand. "Here, your wound..."

Anita spun the girl around and placed her hands on her back. There were lots of scratches there and Anita took her time healing each of them.

"Thank... thank you." The girl said. She seemed very rattled, and had to lean on Anita for support.

"We need to get you out of the open." Anita said. "The government building has protective enchantments, as well as a strong militia presence, so you should be safe there."

The girl nodded, but did not move. "I can't use magic or anything..." She said. "I... I'm not sure if I can make it on my own."

What a hopeless person. Anita thought irritably. A Sphinx was one thing, but most of the creatures out here were nothing of consequence. If she could only use magic...

"I will escort you there." Anita said. "But we must move quickly."

The girl nodded.

She was not a bad runner, at least. Far better than she. Anita floated ahead of her, looking out for enemies.

There were plenty of creatures in these woods, but most were more than willing to ignore them. Anita's aura of power was frightening to them. They knew that she was someone to be feared.

They came to the building without incident. But what they found was quite problematic.

Nearly a dozen Snake Men walked back and forth in front of the building. Their long tongues flitting in and out of their mouth as they swung large curved swords back and forth.

"What are those things?" The girl whispered. She sounded terrified.

"Snake men." Anita murmured back. "Listen... I will not be able to beat this many. I am going to have to distract them, and then you can run up to the door and get inside. Okay?"

The girl nodded, but not confidently. She looked very, very nervous. Anita smiled at her. "Do not be scared." She said. "Leave it to me."

She stepped out of the woods and onto the well-kept grass. The Snake men instantly all turned to stare at her.

She bowed to them. "Greetings." She said, as she hovered over to the side, so that they would look away from the spot she emerged from. "How are you doing today?"

The beasts, as she thought, all mindlessly advanced towards her, their swords bared in front of her. It was not unheard of for Snake Men to be able to use magic, so she was sure to not let her guard down as they advanced.

However, none of them seemed to have any power at all. They surrounded her in a circle, their tongues ever flickering, as they raised their weapons to strike.

As they came closer to her, closing the circle around her, she merely shot upward, up into the sky. She looked down at them, her eyes narrowed as they looked up at her.

They could not use magic, no, but one of them had a bow. It raised the weapon at her and pulled the string back, ready to fire. She glared at the arrow: It snapped in half and flopped onto the ground, worthless.

She looked to the left and saw the girl she was escorting dash to the front door. However, despite her best efforts to distract the beasts, they were more than well aware of her presence.

One raised her sword at her and let out a hiss. It charged forward, breaking the circle around her. It was fast, but could she outrun it?

Probably, but Anita didn't want to take that chance. "Take this!" She shouted, as she used her powers to rip the sword out of the beast's

hand, and just as quickly, spin it around to slash at its previous owner. It cried in pain as it keeled over.

She saw from the corner of her eye the bowman lining up another shot, which she narrowly avoided. The girl was climbing the steps now; the door was open...

She swooped down after her and soared through the door, her cloak billowing around her. Her first order of business was to tend to the girl. She was slumped over, staring at the ground, sweat pouring from her.

"You did well." Anita told her. "Please... relax. You're safe now."

The girl nodded, as she stood up. She was still shaking. "I... think I need to go lie down now." She said.

Anita turned around. There were three other people in the room with them. Government workers, clearly. She recognized one of the snobby looking older ladies, and-

"Oh, Mr. Charles." She said, a little surprised to see him. "It is... a pleasure."

She was keenly aware that the first and last time they had met she had been very rude. Hopefully, Charles was not going to hold that against her.

"Please escort the girl into the main hall." He told the snobby lady. "Make sure she's comfortable. I need to speak with the Witch alone."

The woman nodded. She took the girl by the arm and led her further down the hallway. Anita intently stared at Charles.

"Well?" She asked. She folded her arms. "I would much rather be out there helping people, if you do not mind..."

"This is important." He said. "Please."

That got her attention. "What is the problem?" Anita asked. "Tell me."

"Come with me."

She cast a confused look at the other man who had been standing here by the door, who was staring intently out the window at the Snake Men outside. He was leaning forward, peering out the window.

"Wait, Charles." He said sharply. "Someone else is coming."

"What?"

Anita walked up behind him and peered out the window. The Snake Men had turned around, and were advancing towards... someone.

"We shall talk about this later." Anita said. "We need to get whoever that is inside."

Charles nodded. He moved to the door and opened it up, his hand reaching for his Sun Gun. "I know no magic." He told her. "You will have to fight them. But I will help him inside."

"Charles, no- "

He ignored the other man and stepped outside.

Anita shook her head. "I have to fight them? She repeated.

"Honestly..."

She stepped out after him, hand on her hip, as she watched Charles race towards the man staggering towards them. The snake people were nearly on them. There were five of them. Far too many to fight at once.

She took flight soaring slightly above them, and tapped one on the head with her foot. It whirled around, snapping at her, before she soared out of reach again.

Keeping five of them distracted at once would be incredibly dangerous, she realized. If she could just take out two or three-

The neck of the snake man extended and its powerful jaws wrapped around her leg. She screamed as she was slammed into the ground.

They were everywhere, all around her. She could not bear the thought of any of them touching her...

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

She could barely even see her enemy: the only thing she could hope to do was push all her magic outward from her with all the force she could muster. The snake men took several steps back. The energy flowing through her was simply too much for them to handle.

She turned her head, seeing that Charles was looking back at her anxiously, his arm wrapped firmly around the other man’s waist.

I cannot die here.

She was completely exhausted. She could barely breathe due to the exertion of such a powerful burst of energy. But she had to... make it back... to the building...

She could not even rise from the ground. The most she could do was slide along at about the pace of a swift walk.

“No... No...”

They were advancing on her again, and this time there was nothing she could do to defend herself. She couldn’t even tilt her head up to look at them properly, she was just so tired...

“Anita!”

No... not now...

She forced herself to jolt upward, shooting herself up into the air. It was not a controlled flight: it was more like a magically powered jump. She felt her vision fade as she soared through the air, and Charles’ reaching out for her...

...

“Are you still with us?”

Anita rolled over, refusing to open her eyes. “No, Natalie, another hour please...”

“I guess not.” The voice said. “Charles, how could you let her do that?”

"No one else in the building could even hope to fight those things."
He responded. "We would never have gotten that man inside without her."

"Still... relying on a witch....?"

Natalie would never speak of her that way, she thought faintly. Maybe... she wasn't back in the Garden?

"What.... Happened?" She moaned out.

The voices stopped.

"Nothing. Just get some rest."

Anita could not even manage a nod. She was already dead to the world.

...

Ciela arrived at the restaurant without any further incident. Signs of creatures being present were there, of course, but all of them had seen fit to start giving her a wide berth. These things, for the most part, were nothing to her.

But she still couldn't help but worry about everyone else. Especially Marionetta, Callisto, and her Dad. Just where were they? What were they doing?

She had not seen a single person since she had left the house, and she was beginning to become anxious that everyone else had fallen into horrible trouble.

But then she always remembered her Dad's note, which always caused her to scowl. Could he not have TOLD her that something terrible was happening in the colony? Why did he just have to run off and leave her?

The restaurant looked deserted from the outside. But that may not be the case. It was very possible people were hiding inside. The only way to be sure was to look.

"Hello?" She asked, as she rapped on the door. "Luna? It's your favorite Dracula Slayer..."

There was no answer.

She slowly pushed the door open. It was unlocked.

The inside was a complete mess. Tables and chairs were strewn everywhere, and shards of glass from broken plates and glasses lined the floor. She looked around intently to find what could have caused this, but to no avail.

There were no blood stains, so...

Something burst into the room. A tiny girl with short black hair bounced forward energetically.

"Selene, where did you- "

The girl stopped. "O-oh!" She gasped, putting a hand to her mouth. "Um... welcome!" She bowed.

Ciela looked at her, trying to place where she had seen her before. "Are you one of Luna's employees?" She asked curiously.

"Luna...?" The girl shook her head. "Oh, no, no. I'm not from here. Um, my name is Tomoko. I'm the personal assistant for an agent of Cereza."

Oh, yes. Now she remembered where she had placed that girl before. She was with that girl Selene. The one who had come calling to hunt down a monster.

"We've met before." Ciela told her. "But that was weeks ago."

"Have we?" Tomoko asked blankly. "I... uh, don't recall."

"You and your master came to see Solaire about- "

"Oh, I remember now!" Tomoko said suddenly, clapping her hands together. "You're friends with the witch girl! The one who did our job for us!"

Ciela nodded. She was a little surprised at her perkiness. Tomoko smiled warmly at her. Ciela had the strong suspicion that Tomoko wasn't aware of her reputation within the capital.

"That was no easy feat, believe me. Selene was very impressed." She suddenly frowned. "And for your information, I merely assist her in certain tasks. She is not my 'master.'"

What kind of tasks? Ciela wondered. She could tell just by looking at her she was no warrior. She had no weapons and she could sense no magical aura from her. All she had on her person was a small notebook tucked under her arm. Hardly anything to be feared, unless it happened to be another novel by M.K. Fey.

"We would never have been able to beat it if Anita hadn't arrived when she did." Ciela said. "Do you hunt creatures that powerful often?"

Tomoko nodded. "When the situation calls for it, yes. We are the first to be called on."

"Really?" Ciela asked, surprised. "Just the two of you?" Usually entire teams of fighters would be deployed to fight a creature like that. To think two people would be sent to handle such a creature was absurd to her.

"No, I never said that." Tomoko said quickly. "I- um, don't fight. Selene is the one who- well..."

She looked down at her feet. She seemed unwilling to talk anymore, although Ciela could not understand why.

Perhaps taking another angle would be necessary. "Where is Selene now?" Ciela asked. "You didn't get separated, did you?"

Tomoko shook her head. "Uh, no. Not really." She looked embarrassed. "She... uh, left me here. Alone."

Ciela gave her an incredulous look.

"Okay, okay." Tomoko said. "This is going to sound weird, but we honestly didn't know anything was wrong when we left our camp."

Selene was hungry, so we came here to find something. But when we got here... we found this mess."

Tomoko shrugged.

"So yeah." Tomoko finished. "We realized something was wrong and Selene set out to find out what."

Ciela was even more confused than she had been to begin with.

"Okay, let's back up a bit." She said. "So you're saying that when you got here that the place was already torn up?"

"Yes."

"Did you find who did it?"

"Well, no." Tomoko said. "But we found a body in the back."

"What?"

A sinking feeling welled up in her. Could it be...?

Tomoko looked at her sympathetically. "Would you like to see her?" She asked. "Please, follow me..."

Ciela did as she asked and followed close behind her, but made sure to check the surrounding area for any clues as to what happened.

The kitchen, in many ways, seemed more of a mess than the dining hall. Food was strewn everywhere, and she was forced to step in some spilled fruit as they made their way across the hall.

"She's through here." Tomoko said quietly, as she pushed the door open. "Um, she is definitely dead, by the way, please don't be... well, scared of what you see."

Ciela said nothing as they stepped through the door.

This was the living room, and everything in here was torn to shreds. Pieces of the couch lay scattered around the room, the bookshelf had been thrown to the side scattering each of the books around the room, and the body hanging from the ceiling by its entrails.

Somehow, the remains of the girl had been attached to the ceiling fan in the room, and it spun around and around and around...

"Selene got smacked by it." Tomoko said in a matter of fact sort of way. "So don't get too close."

Ciela gave her another weird look before taking a closer look at the body. It was a young girl, about her age, dressed in the dress uniform Luna gave to all her waitresses. How sad... she did not recognize her, but she knew full well that Luna liked and cared about all her employees. This would break her heart...

"It's not her, then..." Ciela murmured. "Hey, Tomoko. Any clues as to where everybody else who works here went? And what about whatever did this?"

"It wasn't me, if that's what you're thinking." She said. "I couldn't even reach the fan, I'm so short... No, we think whatever it was moved on by now."

Ciela looked at the girl's insides spilled all over the floor, trying to place where each of the organs were supposed to go. "Is there anything missing?" She asked. "Like, any specific parts?"

"Nothing." She said. "Whatever it was just popped her in the stomach, pulled out her insides, and then tied her up to that fan."

Disgusting.

"An act of maliciousness, then." Ciela said. "We're dealing with something that loves to kill for the sake of killing..."

She turned away.

"If no one else is here, and you are completely capable of staying here by yourself... I need to move on and find new survivors."

"That does sound like a plan." Tomoko admitted. "But if you stick around for a while, Selene will come back and might have some idea of what's going on."

"Will she really?" Ciela asked, intrigued. "Well, that is certainly very tempting..." If she left now, she would be passing up on a valuable

opportunity to learn more about the incident. She would be completely blind otherwise. But on the other hand, she felt reluctant to just sit around while the colony was torn apart around them.

"Of course!" Tomoko said brightly, clapping her hands together again. "She may not admit it, but she was really impressed with what your friend Anita did for us and is more than willing to return the favor." She gave her a wry smile. "Perhaps you three will become a new Golden Trio!"

"The strongest in the world?" Ciela asked, amused. "Is Selene really that strong?"

Tomoko laughed, but did not answer.

...

Marionetta leaned in closer to Leona, feeling her ragged breathing.

"It'll be okay, Mari." She heard her say. "We're safe here, believe me."

A Sun Gun flashed again. The light filtered through a hole in the door, causing dark shadows to fall across their face.

"Don't let them any closer to the house!"

"Fire!"

The lights flashed again. Leona wrapped her hand around her head, holding her closer.

They had been living here for so long without any sort of protection around the house that the attack from the monsters had taken them completely off guard. It was hard to believe that only a few short hours ago she had been happier than she ever had been before.

Marionetta was completely lost in memories as the door burst open.

"The vehicle is here!" The Son of the Sun said urgently. "Can you walk?"

"We're fine." Leona told him. "But what about your men?"

"We'll be able to fight more effectively once you're evacuated." He told her. "They sent in reinforcements as well, please don't worry about us."

Leona nodded. "Come, Marionetta." She said. "We need to get out of here."

She nodded, completely terrified as they got to their feet and crept out into their hallway.

Their house had been completely torn apart by the conflict. Doors had been blocked off with their furniture and balls of magic fire had left terrible scorch marks in the wall.

"Alright, the vehicle is parked behind the house." He told them. "We will stay here. The men there are armed and are there to protect you from anything that may come after you."

"You're expecting us to go over there alone?" Leona asked sharply.

"We will hold them off as best we can." He said. "But some of them may come after you. My advice to you is to run as fast as you can to the escape vehicle. Don't stop for anything. Understood?"

Leona nodded. "I... understand." She said. "Our lives are in your hands."

He nodded back. "Take care of yourselves." He told them. "On my signal..."

They ran. Neither of them were athletes, but they ran as fast as they could the van parked outside. The doors opened when they were halfway there, and strong arms lifted them up and into the van.

The doors slammed shut behind them. Marionetta was sweating hard and breathing heavily. She felt terrible.

They gasped for breath as the man led them to seats. "It's fine." He said comfortingly. "We're going to take you back to HQ."

Leona nodded. "Thank you..." She said. "Thank you so much."

Marionetta, however, did not speak. Now that they were safely rolling away from the battlefield, she could not help but begin to worry about her friends. Ciela... Anita... Rolf... maybe even Callisto, who she rarely even spoke to...

She had to check up on them. Calisto she had no connection with, but she could check out how the others were doing.

First up was Rolf. She closed her eyes and focused on the bond between them.

She was now looking at the world through Rolf's eyes. He was lying crouched down in the field, breathing softly. She hoped he wasn't injured. But nothing he was doing seemed to indicate he was injured. Was he hiding from something?

She was tempted to ask him, but she knew how suddenly announcing that she was watching him would surprise him, possibly causing him to panic which could put him in more danger. No, she would have to stay quiet this time.

She moved on to Ciela. She was standing in the middle of Luna's, deep in a conversation with another girl. Selene. Her assistant, Tomoko, was sitting off to the side, furiously scribbling notes in her pad.

This time, Marionetta felt confident in announcing her presence.

"Ciela."

She jumped. Selene gave her a strange look as she looked around the room, trying to find the voice.

"It's me." Marionetta said. *"Marionetta."*

"Oh, Marionetta!" Ciela said out loud. The other girls stared at her. "Um, I'm talking to a telepath." She explained in a rush. "Um, hang on..." She furrowed her brow.

"Marionetta! What's going on? Are you hurt?"

"Mother and I just escaped the house." She told her. *"The Sons of the Sun protected us and sent us to safety. We're both fine."*

"That's great to hear!" Ciela told her, enthusiastically. "But what about everyone else?"

"Rolf is outside, doing... something, and I haven't checked in on Anita yet."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" She said impatiently. "Figure out where she is so we can meet up!"

"Okay..."

Her vision went dark. Now she was in Anita's head.

"Huh?"

She was standing in a hallway lit by bright red lights. Beautiful Roses lined the walls and windows.

It took her a while to realize what was going on. Sometimes when someone was in a deep sleep, she could not properly connect with them. In sleep, the mind became relaxed and unwilling to respond to commands.

So what she was looking at, in this hallway, was Anita's dream. Her connection with her was still present, but she could not control her like she could an awake person.

Further down this hallway she would find Anita and her dream. She was nervous of what she would find there. Anita was a witch in training, after all. Ciela's clear revulsion at some of her beliefs and practices had given her the impression that she was, behind closed doors, quite the depraved individual. But Marionetta's curiosity got the better of her and she stepped further down the hallway.

The hallway faded to black as she walked, and eventually she stepped into tall grass high enough to brush against her knee.

She was suddenly standing in an open field, one very similar to the one they had spent all of yesterday in. The sun- or at least, the sun in Anita's mind, was incredibly bright and shined down on them with a pleasant warmth.

Marionetta!

Ciela was waving to her from distance away. Marionetta waved back, almost automatically, hardly registering that this was not the real Ciela. But rather, how Anita viewed Ciela inside her mind.

Although this wasn't her dream, she quickly realized that she herself was no different. Much like how Ciela became Celes Chere in the cursed book, Marionetta was not quite herself here either. She was not in complete control of her own actions.

"It's wonderful to see you!" Ciela said brightly. "I'm so glad you made it!"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." Marionetta replied. "This is such a happy day."

"It is!" Ciela said, smiling wider than Marionetta had ever seen her. "Come on! We have food!"

She took her hand and dragged her away, down the hill.

There was a fantastic spread on the table before them. It was a table over three times as large as the one they had set the day before, and had a much wider selection of foods. There were dishes here that she hadn't seen since she had left the city as a child, and even some she had no knowledge of at all.

"Is Anita here?" Marionetta asked Ciela. "I'd like to see her."

"Oh, she's getting ready." Ciela told her. "No one has seen her yet at all."

"Really?" She asked, surprised. "Why, I don't believe it!"

This doesn't seem like me at all. Marionetta thought as she looked around the landscape. Having a casual conversation about a party seemed like the sort of thing that was beyond her. Was this how Anita thought she acted?

Her eyes fell on Ciela's hand, where a small ring was placed on her finger. "Oh, when is your wedding, anyway?"

"Soon, soon." Ciela said. "We had to put it off a couple of months so Anita could come, but we have it all planned out and everything."

Calisto wasn't happy, but I managed to talk him into it." She laughed. "It's like we're already married!" She said, in a joking sort of way.

Marionetta giggled as well. She had no on her own ring, she thought irritably. Did Anita not want her to get married?

"Marionetta!"

She jumped. She opened her eyes and looked around the van wildly. Mom was waving her hand in front of her face. "Are you alright?" She asked, concerned. "Is something the matter?"

She could not even speak at first. Being jolted awake made it difficult for her to get her bearings. But she managed to shake her head.

"Are you sure?" Leona asked, placing a hand on her head. "You don't look well at all..."

"I'm... fine." She said stiffly, looking down at the ground. "I was just... I was just... using my... powers..."

She had difficulty getting the words out, but Leona understood completely.

"You were?" She asked. "For what? If you don't mind me asking!" She said the last bit very quickly. She knew just how badly mentioning her powers out loud tended to bother her.

"I was... trying to check up on my friends." She said.

"Oh no..." Leona whispered. "Marionetta, are they- "

"They're fine." She said hurriedly. "It's just... Anita, the Witch, she's asleep and I ended up in her dream..."

"What?"

"And you.... Woke me up." She said. "So... I don't feel so well..."

She keeled over, out of the seat, but Leona quickly wrapped her arm around her to prop her up again. "I'm so sorry, Marionetta." She said. "Here, maybe we can get you a drink..."

...

It had been several minutes since Marionetta had gotten in touch with her. Ciela had been hoping that she could get into contact with Anita and they could start swapping information, but that had not happened.

"What's the matter?" Tomoko asked. She was leaning backward on a wooden chair. "Is something wrong?"

"She's not calling back." She said. "I just hope she's not in trouble..."

"You said this girl was a telepath..." Selene said from across the room. She was leaning against the wall on the opposite end of the room. "So there is no way to get in contact with her unless she makes contact, yes?"

"That is true, yes."

Selene leaned forward. "I think we are wasting our time here." She said. "Your friend can contact you anywhere. But the monsters outside certainly aren't going to be driven away on their own. I think we should just head to your Government building now, so we can be briefed on what's going on and how to deal with the issue."

"Do you not have any idea of what's going on?"

"I do." Selene said. "I know what's going on, but not why."

"What do you mean?"

Selene turned around, spreading her arms wide. "What changed in this colony to spur such an incredible attack?" She asked. "Even the most dangerous places on this earth don't have this many creatures lurking around every corner. I think they were summoned here. But for what purpose?"

"Summoned?" Tomoko said slowly. "Like... magically summoned?" She scratched her cheek. "Like creatures from Otherworld?"

"Not necessarily." Selene said. "It is possible for skilled witches to call forth people and creatures from around our own world. But to do so at this scale is... troubling."

"You think witches are behind this?" Ciela asked. "From what covenant?"

"Impossible to say." Selene said. "I can think of none who hate humans badly enough to pull a stunt like this. We need more information."

...

Anita sat up on the bed, feeling a little uneasy.

"Just how did I get here...?"

She looked around frantically at the room around her, trying her best to remember what had happened.

The door to the room opened.

"Oh, you're awake." The gentle voice of a woman said. "Are you feeling well?"

Anita placed a hand on her arm, rubbing it. "Mana exhaustion." She said. "I should be fine in a couple of hours."

She slid out of the bed and stood up. "My shoes, please?" She asked. "I am sorry I cannot fetch them myself, but I should not be using magic..."

"Here they are." The woman said, holding them out to her. Anita thanked her as she slid the shoes onto her feet, one after the other. She rarely did this without magic, and she struggled for a moment with the knots. But she got them down eventually.

"The governor would like to have a word with you." The woman said, as Anita got to her feet. "About the situation."

She remembered now. The monsters were overrunning the colony. "Has anything changed?" She asked, as she got to her feet. She winced. She was sore on top of everything else.

"Some new information has come forward." She said. "But we need your input."

"About what?"

"You will see."

She felt a strong sense of foreboding as she smoothed out her robe with her hands. "Yes, I will meet with Charles." She said. "But what of Solaire?"

The woman stared at her. Anita stared back, unwilling to break her gaze. "He is missing." She said at last. "We have met with his men who have told us as much."

She turned away, her hand on the door. "Please follow me. And quickly."

She did so. They went through several hallways and doors until finally, they came to a large double door.

"This is our conference room." She explained to her. "You will be asked to answer certain critical questions concerning the incident to our leaders."

"But Solaire is not here."

The woman outright glared at her this time. The look amused her. She was trying to be intimidating, but she looked like a walrus. "Our rightful leaders." She stressed. "The... militia has nothing to do with us." Without another word, she turned and opened the door.

"She is awake."

Anita stepped through into the room.

It was a very small, room with one very long table of it. She had seen many like in Cereza during her early training, and she believed there was one just like it in the colony she had lived in years ago. Unlike Witches, who generally always referred to an absolute authority to resolve issues, humans preferred discussing issues at length amongst themselves.

"Ah, Rose Anita." Charles said, standing up. "Please, you must be exhausted... Feel free to sit down."

She bowed politely and did so. "Forgive me if I behave a little oddly." She said. "I am still very much recovering from my ordeal, and I- "

"Yes, yes, we understand completely." The man on Charles' right said impatiently. He was an older man with a head full of white hair. He looked at her with that familiar look of distaste that was so common among older people in Cereza. He remembered the days when all witches exploited humans as badly as the Dracula. "But please understand that this cannot wait."

"I understand completely." She told him, trying to keep her voice polite. "The situation... has it improved at all?"

The woman on Charles' left shook her head. "No." She said. "In fact, it has only gotten worse."

"How so?"

"I misspoke." The woman said hurriedly. "The situation itself has not changed much at all. However, our understanding of it has. And what we have uncovered is... disastrous. Not just for the community, but for humanity at large."

"And not just humanity." Charles said. "We have every reason to believe that this incident is a threat to the entire world."

He was completely serious. What could spell such a huge disaster?

"I understand that having your borders being broken may be a cause of concern." She said slowly. "But it sounds like you're describing a... apocalyptic scenario."

"That is exactly what we are implying."

Anita shook her head. "I do not understand how you came to a conclusion like that." She said. "It seems a little... extreme view of the situation."

"We felt the same way." Charles said, folding his hands together on the table. "At least, until the man we rescued told us his story."

"The man...?"

"This man is a member of the local, unsanctioned militia group The Sons of the Sun." Charles said. "Due to our lack of a military due to circumstances outside of our control, we have allowed them to take

up arms against evil when the need calls for it. As such, this man was among the first to learn that anything was wrong."

"He was one of the very first to encounter the enemy, and had a brief dialogue with their leaders." The woman said. "They, allegedly, introduced themselves and declared that this colony would be the battle ground for the fate of the world."

"That is a bold claim." Anita said. "Who were these people?"

"They call themselves the Black Sun." Charles said.

Anita stiffened.

"Their personal names are as follows..."

He glanced down at a piece of paper by his right arm.

"Lumiose Moana."

It really was them. She thought in horror, as she gripped the side of her chair. This truly could evolve into a cataclysm.

"Frideswide the Giant."

How could this have happened? She thought in horror. How could they be here of all places?

"Black Widow Charlotte."

This could not be happening. She thought faintly as she slumped forward in her chair. This could not be-

"Rose Calanthe." He looked at her expectantly, expecting a reaction. She was too shocked to even acknowledge the gesture.

"And finally- "

"Hold on." The man on his right side. "Did you just say Rose? As in- "

Anita needed to drag herself out of her reverie. These people could not panic: there had to be a way to drive them away from here, away from the colony. There had to be.

"Yes, she was once a member of our sect." Anita said. "Once. However, like all members of the Black Sun, she has turned her back

on her master to serve another.”

“Another?” Charles repeated.

“They can do that?” The woman asked. She looked confused. “But don’t your masters demand absolute loyalty?”

“I cannot speak for the other patrons.” She responded. “But Karuma expects us, his women, to take matters like this into our own hands. It is our duty to hunt down traitors, not his. In Calanthe’s case, she managed to slip out of our reach. Rest assured that we want her dealt with as badly as you do.”

She stood up. Despite her inner turmoil, she knew what she had to do.

“In fact, contacting my superiors is very likely our best bet in saving the colony.” She said. “Rose Calanthe is a powerful witch, to be sure, but she is no much for several others, including Rose Natalie, my mentor, and especially not the High Witch of our order.”

“But your home is far from here.” The man told her. “Too far. Our city is much closer in comparison, and we have a man stronger than any Witch... the Witch King.”

“Ah yes.” Anita said, trying not to roll her eyes. “The Witch King.”

“The Witch King?” Charles repeated. “He would need to abandon his work in Cereza to come here. How long do you think it would take him to fix our problem?”

“If he’s by himself, a little while. But if he brings some real soldiers down here...”

“Hold on.” Anita said. “Do you really believe that a single man could defeat five of the most dangerous witches in the world?”

The man gave her a smug smile. “You know very little of the Witch King, it seems.” He said. “He does so every day.”

“Nearly all dangerous witches are brought to justice and burned because of him.” The woman told her, shaking her finger at him.

“There is no better suited man for the task.”

"There's a good reason that this... Black Sun isn't going anywhere near Cereza." Her male companion said smugly.

Anita thought it would be best to be diplomatic and not share how she felt about their plan.

"Very well." She said. "A collaborative effort, then. My coven wants Rose Calanthe dealt with, they will surely come to your aid. And you can.... Call in your Witch King, if you need to feel extra secure."

She was feeling very confident now. A plan was beginning to broil in her mind.

"Now that these degenerates have come out of hiding, we shall crush them beneath our heel!"

Anita slammed her hand down on the table, her hear set aflame. She would not let this colony fall on her watch.

...

"We're very nearly there now, please relax."

Marionetta nodded. She had begun to compose herself in the last several minutes, but all she wanted now was to get out of the cramped vehicle and stretch her legs. It would be the only way to properly wake her up.

"Thank you so much." Leona told the man. "I don't know what we would have done without you, truly..."

There were no windows from where they were sitting: It was a vehicle designed for transporting things and people onto battlefields. Despite that, she wished she could see outside and see what was going on. She still felt too woozy to try to use her powers again, and the shaking of the vehicle going off road was not helping.

And just as she was beginning to feel genuinely sick of their journey, they suddenly came to a stop.

"What is it?" The man beside them said sharply. "Hey, what are you-"

“Quiet!”

The driver up front shook his head at them and then stepped out of the car. “It’s some kind of... giant web.” He called back to them. “Not sure we should go this way.”

“Can’t you just burn through it with your gun?”

“I could, but it’s so thick I’d have to turn up the power on it. I could accidentally start a forest fire.”

“Fine, we go around. Is there another way?”

The man slammed the door shut and backed the vehicle up, carefully maneuvering in between the trees.

She wasn’t sure how easy it was to get stuck on this kind of terrain, but she hoped that the driver knew what he was doing. The idea of having to get out and walk to their HQ terrified her.

But despite her worrying, the driver managed to do a complete turn and started off in the other direction.

“We’re going to have to take a slightly longer route.” The man told them. “But at least we don’t have to deal with whatever made that web.”

He was trying to brighten the mood, but all Marionetta could think about was that they had never actually seen whatever it was that had made that web...

The vehicle bounded along the road and made a turn to the right, cutting through some more trees. Something thumped on the roof of the car. The man pointed his rifle upwards. “What was that?” Leona asked sharply.

“A tree branch, maybe...”

It thumped again.

“Something is up there.” The man muttered. “Watch yourself.”

The driver up front nodded. He gripped the rifle by his side, as if he were expecting an attack. The windows in the front of the car made

him the most vulnerable person in the vehicle.

The thumping continued, right above their heads. It sounded as if it was walking right above them.

"Try shaking it off once you have room to move."

"You don't have to tell me twice..." The driver said grimly. "Be prepared for a rough ride..."

The three of them sitting in the back tensed up, each of them expecting the worst.

They got it.

The vehicle suddenly spun off to the left, sliding across the ground and slamming its right side into a tree. A cry of surprise filled the air.

"Go go go go!"

He did not need to be told twice. The vehicle started moving again almost immediately. It jolted forward and back onto the path.

They heard something let out another cry behind them, but they were already far out of its reach.

Leona let out a deep breath she had been holding in. "Wow..." She said. "That... was an adventure."

Marionetta had to agree. She had been completely terrified throughout the ordeal. There had been no Anita or Ciela to fight off the creature for her. She had felt completely powerless.

"It's alright now." The man told them. "You're in good hands."

Marionetta nodded again as she hugged Leona again. She certainly did not feel as if she was safe, and likely would never until the situation was completely resolved.

"What is going on here...?" She wondered.

....

"There is nothing of interest out here." Selene said slowly, her head bowed over. Her long, flowing black hair fell across her face,

obscuring her mask completely.

"I... see." Ciela looked inquisitively at Selene again, trying to decide on what she was dealing with here.

Selene was a very hard person to read. Although she was not shy, the way Marionetta was, she often did not even speak unless spoken to. She had a chilly sort of confidence surrounding her. It was hard to put into words.

Ciela glanced upwards the sky and looked at the beam of light above them. "What is that, anyway?" She asked. "Did you figure that out?"

Selene stopped. "What is that...?" She repeated, sounding confused. "What is what?"

Tomoko suddenly leapt in between the two of them. "Excuse me." She said. She leaned into Selene and began frantically whispering into her ear. Ciela watched, confused, as Selene gave several brisk nods.

"I see." Selene said. "Very well."

Tomoko stared back, intently staring at Ciela. Her demeanor had completely changed. She suddenly looked alert and focused. "My apologies." She said. "Selene requires my aid for certain tasks, and among them..."

"Silence, Tomoko." Selene said. "I am thinking."

She immediately did as she was asked, her hands folded in front of her.

"So... the beam of light in the sky." Selene said slowly. "That is unusual, isn't it?"

"You mean you didn't notice?" Ciela asked blankly. She had the impression she was missing something. "But it's right there- "

Tomoko leaned into Selene again and whispered something else. Selene nodded again. She completely understood, whatever she was saying.

"My apologies." Selene said. "I was conducting my investigation under the assumption that the monsters themselves were the problem. I had no knowledge of this... beam of light."

"My apologies!" Tomoko said quickly. "I really thought you would be able to- "

"Never make assumptions" Selene said shortly.

Tomoko bowed to her. Ciela was still confused.

"Hey, what's going on, exactly?" She asked. "Just- "

Selene interrupted her. "This light..." She said. "I admit that it piques my interest. Perhaps if we were to... follow it, we would find something interesting."

"Follow it?" Ciela repeated. It was a straight line, after all, but it went off in two different directions.

"Did I say something strange?"

"Well, it goes off in two different directions, so I'm not sure- "

"We will follow one direction and see where it leads us." Selene said firmly. "After you."

Ciela gave her a weird look as she picked a direction to head off in. The other girls followed at a distance behind her, whispering among themselves.

...

"So what is that beam of light, anyway?"

They had been spinning their wheels for several minutes. Now that they knew what was going on, they were busy going through all the details.

"Do you not know?" Anita asked, sounding surprised. The group of older people in front of her shook their heads. "Honestly..."

She raised her finger and a burst of light burst out from it. "It is pure magical energy." She explained, as it hit the wall in front of her. "It is

not dangerous in any way, as you can see. In fact, even you all have a little inside of you..."

She winced, lowering her finger. She was still too worn out to be using magic at all. She had acted purely on reflex.

"But what is it doing in the sky?"

"I am not sure." Anita answered. But I were to hazard a guess... it is some part of some elaborate ritual. I doubt it has been performed it."

"Yet?"

"Yes." She said. "If we allow that beam to stay where it is, something horrible will happen to this colony. I am sure of it."

...

"What is that?"

Tomoko pointed off in the distance, to their right.

"There, through the trees."

She was standing on her toes, looking out over the horizon. She had a slightly better view, but she was so short that it hardly mattered.

Ciela stood right up next to her and squinted her eyes. Off in the distance, barely visible through the trees, was another beam of light.

"There's another one?" She asked in surprise.

"Another one?" Selene asked. "Another monster?"

"No, another beam of light." Ciela told her, as she leapt back down.

"So there is more than one. What does that mean? Do you know?"

"I have no magical experience at all." Selene told her. "I have not the slightest clue."

No experience at all? None in the slightest? She was getting even more curious about this new companion.

Tomoko jumped beside her and pointed at the light they had been following. "It looked almost like the lines converge at some point."

She said. "That's good, isn't it?"

"I'm no expert either." Ciela confessed. "But I think that's where the beams must be going, not where they are coming from."

"I think so too..." Tomoko muttered. "What do you think, Selene? Should we turn around and see where the beam is coming from? Or should we keep going?"

"I want to find the source." She said immediately. "I want to find whoever is behind this. Then we can get to the bottom of the situation."

Tomoko nodded. "Very well." She said. "Um, and Ciela? If you want to go the other way, that's fine. But we're going to find the source."

"What?" She shook her head. "No, I'm not letting you go off by yourselves!"

Ciela trotted after them, rather surprised at the abruptness of it all. They had not even considered her opinion on what they should do next. It was like she didn't even matter to them.

Did they think she was just an ordinary civilian? Surely not...

Something so silly should not have upset her so much.

(I'll show them. I'll show them both what I can do!)

Several minutes later, Ciela realized that she had been to this place before. She had lived long enough in the colony now to have the general layout memorized. "There's a lake or pond or something around here." She said. "It's not far."

Selene nodded. "I thought so." She said. "That is where we must go."

"You sure?" Ciela looked back up at the beam of light. It seemed to be in the same general direction, but...

"I know she's there." Selene went on to say. "My first foe."

"Our what?"

Selene didn't answer. Instead she suddenly sped up and began walking ahead of them. Tomoko placed a hand on Ciela's shoulder. "Leave this to her, alright?" She said. "She's been looking forward to this all day."

"Looking forward to it?" Ciela repeated, scandalized. "But- "

"Shh." Tomoko told her. "Just stay back, okay? We don't want to get hurt."

She was treating her like a civilian. Ciela realized. She did not understand just who she was and what she could do.

Ciela looked up at the water below them. Selene was standing there on the hill, overlooking it.

"She is here." Selene said. "In the water."

What was her first clue? Ciela thought irritably. The giant ray of light was shooting up from the center of the lake and across the sky. It shone little lights across the water. In all honesty, it was quite striking and pretty.

"Is she alone?" Tomoko asked.

"Yes." Selene said. "Very much so."

She reached for her face and gently pulled away her mask. Her hair fell across her face again. It was a small thing, but the change in appearance was striking. She looked much more disheveled in that state, far from the striking young woman they had seen earlier.

"Tomoko, can you hold this? I don't want it ruined..."

"O-of course..."

Tomoko reached forward and took the mask from her gently, cradling it in her arms. Selene shifted back to face the water. Her hair completely covered her face.

"I will need a boat..." She said. "Are there any nearby?"

"A boat?" Ciela asked blankly. "What for?"

She did not answer. Instead Tomoko led her down the path in the woods to the little boat house and dock by the lake.

She and Calisto had spent a day here once, she realized. It wasn't all that long ago, but things had changed very quickly. And for the worse.

Nearly all the cute little boats they had available for the public to use had been torn to pieces by something. Her eyes fell on a piece of shredded wood at her feet. What were those scratch marks? She wondered.

"A monster did this." Ciela said. "Something that hates boats."

Tomoko snorted with laughter, but Selene said nothing.

There was one boat remaining, but it wasn't in the little port. It was in the back room, with tools surrounding it. It had just undergone maintenance.

"Okay." Ciela said. "I've got this."

She wrapped her arms around it and heaved the thing upright. Tomoko gasped and took a step back.

"How heavy is that?"

Ciela easily carried it back to the port and set it in the water. Thankfully, it did not sink. "There you go." She said. "What now?"

Selene wordlessly stepped into the boat. She stood upright inside of it. She shifted around a little, getting a feel for how the boat felt under her. "Very well." She said at last. "I am ready."

Tomoko stepped forward, and pushed the boat out into the water!

"Hey, what are you doing?" Ciela snapped, as the little boat drifted away from the dock. She raised her hand, intent on calling it back by using magic, but Tomoko reached out a hand and grabbed her arm.

"No, she knows what she's doing." Tomoko said quickly. "You'll only bother her if we interfere."

Ciela stared hopelessly as the girl drifted further and further into the lake.

...

Selene slid out into the open water, keenly listening to the sounds of the water splashing around her.

It was there, under her. Watching. When would it show itself?

She stood completely straight on the front of the boat, waiting quietly for it to appear. She let out a deep breath and let herself relax. It would not be long now. It was anxious for her blood.

It was moving, she could hear it. Swimming frantically up towards her...

She leaned back as a powerful fin burst from the water and tried to grab her. Splashes of water from it struck her face as she ducked, her fingers sharpening themselves into claws.

"Uggh!"

She had missed the beast's eye, and instead merely poked a hole through its cheek. Hardly a deadly blow, considering the creature she was dealing with. She stood impassively, listening deeply to the soft splashes of water.

As quickly as it had come, it had sunk back under the waves.

Selene sighed. Already she was disappointed. "I had no idea I was dealing with a coward." She said, her voice icy cold. "Show yourself."

The creature appeared again some distance away. It rose out of the water, its hands outstretched as it slid upward, like a worm crawling out of a hole, until it was standing on the surface of the water itself.

"I very much underestimated you." It said. It had difficulty speaking their language. it had a bizarre accent that was impossible to place, and it seemed like its mouth was not shaped in a way to easily allow words to flow. "I thought of you as nothing more than a trespasser... but you've come to kill me, haven't you?"

"Yes." Selene said. "You are just another creature for me to kill."

Some distance away, Ciela and Tomoko were all sitting watching the proceedings below them. Ciela clenched her hand into a fist. She had not realized they were up against a fish person, and a Witch at that.

The fish person was not of the same variety as the Shark Tooth they had fought during their scuffle with the River King. Her head was elongated and nasty looking, with rows and rows of nasty teeth taking up her mouth. Her scales, although pitch black, occasionally flashed a wide range of colors. Most striking of all was the bulb of light that was attached to its head via a sort of tendon. Ciela had difficulty pulling her eyes away from the ball. Something about it seemed almost hypnotic.

Selene, despite effectively countering the Witch's first strike, did not seem particularly interested in the creature now. She was standing still as a board, balancing herself in the boat, facing the completely wrong direction.

"Why isn't she looking at it?" Ciela asked. "Does she not know it's there?"

"She does." Tomoko answered. "Um, actually, this is kind of a good time to bring this up, isn't it...?"

"What?"

"Please don't tell her I told you this, but Selene is blind."

"What?"

She looked back down at the encounter before them, shocked. Suddenly, Tomoko's presence suddenly made a lot more sense to her.

"So who exactly are you, anyway?" Selene asked. "I'm told you may have several accomplices in the area... will I have to cut them down as well?"

The beast chuckled. "You are a confident one, aren't you?" It asked, its voice low and sinister. "I am Lumiose Monoa, of the Endless Abyss."

"Monoa?" Selene repeated. "I have heard of you."

Lumiose Monoa: A fishperson from the deepest, darkest part of the ocean who had become a witch to terrorize surface dwellers after a creature she had spent her life trying to kill had been caught by a fisherman.

"Humans... all they do is talk."

Moana laughed again. It was a rather gargled sound. Selene smiled at her.

"You know what?" Selene said. "I agree." She relaxed again, placing her hands to her sides. "But what is a fishperson doing so far in the mainland? Surely the prey here isn't to your liking..."

"I am no longer a mere Anglar." Monoa said. "My service to the Black Sun has changed me. I now have found my place in this world."

"The Black Sun?" Selene had never even heard the name before. "What exactly do they do?"

The Witch tilted her long, scaly neck back and sunk back into the water, quickly, but very quietly.

Selene kept her head pointed down down, and tried to get a read on where her opponent was going to pop up next. Her hair fell across her face as she stood, completely still, on the edge of the boat.

The fishperson leapt out from the water behind her and reached its long, thin arms towards her, trying to wrap them around her neck.

Selene did not move at all. Instead, her neck spun completely around and she snapped at the fish person with incredible force, digging her powerful jaws into Monoa's flesh.

"Argh!"

Monoa fell back into the water with a mighty splash as blood and bone was ripped from her arm.

"What in the world was that?" Ciela asked in shock, as Selene spat out the fish person's hand back into the water.

"That should have been your head!" Selene called out. She laughed, her voice dark and sinister, as she pawed at the blood on her mouth. "I have to hand it to you, Lumiose Monoa.... You taste much better than the creatures I usually devour."

She sounded absolutely thrilled, ecstatic even.

"If you thought I would be easy prey, you were sadly very mistaken. Come at me with everything you've got!"

"It's like she's a completely different person!" Ciela muttered, awestruck.

"She drew blood, it's riling her up." Tomoko explained. "Especially since Monoa hasn't died yet. Usually most people don't survive this long. She's really enjoying herself down there."

Monoa rose from the sea again, clutching her arm. With a cry, a wave of water rose from the lake below her and covered the stump where her hand used to be, forming a sort of hand shape. When it fell back into the lake, it had been completely replaced with a new hand.

"I have underestimated you." Monoa said, sounding impressed, as she twitched her fingers, checking to make sure they were all there. "I was under the impression that humans would be our primary foe this day, but it seems something else has rose up against us." She bared her fangs at her. "Perhaps I need to stop playing with my food."

"I feel much the same." Selene purred.

"It is you that will regret challenging me, surface dweller.

She slapped her hands together and let out a cry. Long strands of water burst out from the ocean with incredible force, like mighty

arrows.

Selene dodged each one with ease. Each shot went straight for her head and a small shift caused it to miss entirely. One after the other, the multiple shots fired themselves at her with incredible velocity. But still none touched her.

"How is she doing that?" Ciela asked Tomoko. "If she's blind, how can she- "

"Her other senses are overdeveloped." Tomoko explained. "In fact, she probably knows more about what's going on around here than we do."

Selene smiled softly. "I thought I told you to go all out?" She asked.

The sound of running water filled her ears. Oh. She had been so distracted with her own well-being that she neglected to care for her boat.

"Your boat will sink in a matter of moments." Monoa said smugly.

"Once it does, you will be in my domain. Then, I promise you, you will see me at my most powerful..."

There were only a couple of small holes in the side of the boat. Water was coming in, but at a very slow rate. However, she knew that getting into the water with a fishperson would be suicide. This would have to end quickly.

"Any last words?" Monoa asked. "Or are you just going to stand there?"

She sank back into the water and out of sight. She seemed to have not realized that Selene was more than capable of figuring out where she was by the sound of her moving underneath.

But unlike the last two times, she was not preparing for another attack. Instead she was waiting for her to sink down below, straight towards her.

Selene stood completely still as the water slowly filled up below her. What now?

"You don't scare easily, do you?" Monoa asked. The voice echoed around the place in the sort of way that made it sound like it could be coming from anywhere. Selene did not let that bother her. She knew that Monoa had not moved.

"No." Selene answered.

"Hahaha... at least you are honest."

The water was coming into the boat even faster now. She could feel the water covering her feet. The boat was almost completely submerged.

"I do not know who you are, but you must be put down."

The Witch spread her arms wide.

"May the abyss take you!"

The water under her split completely in half. Selene and her boat fell several feet under water before slamming into the lake floor.

It was completely dry here, she realized right away. Monoa had moved the water itself out of the water to drop her down here.

But not for long.

The weight of the water around her crashed around her, throwing her for a loop. She was now completely submerged at the bottom of the lake, and was unable to move.

She felt the beast rushing towards her, it's fangs bared to peel apart her flesh...

"Selene!"

Tomoko stood up, looking horrified. Ciela took that as permission that it was time to step in.

Ciela jumped forward, sliding down the hill and down to the water.

"Selene!" She called out. "Where are you?"

There was no answer. She combed her eyes left and right across the water looking for something... anything... that would point her in the

right direction as to where they had gone.

"No!"

She kicked at a rock, sending it flying across the lake. She could not believe it. It had ended, just like that, before it had even started.

"You..."

She stepped out into the water, wading out into the depths, without even considering her own actions.

"I'll kill you!"

"Reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee- "

Ciela screamed in pain as the sound hit her ears. She fell to her knees, clutching her head as the wail continued on and on... for what felt like forever.

She thought Tomoko said something behind her, but she didn't care. The pain was just too much. Nothing else mattered besides the sheer agony that this noise was bringing her. Nothing else mattered... nothing.

She put bent her head over, desperately trying to block out the noise, anything to alleviate the pain. And then...

And then...

Quiet. Peaceful, blissful, quiet.

She did not sit up for a couple of moments. Her ears were still ringing. She let out a hollow, empty sounding laugh.

I'm alive.

"Ciela!"

Someone was shaking her.

"Can you hear me?"

She let out a moan. "My... ears are ringing." She said.

"I'm so sorry." Tomoko wailed. "I really didn't think it would come to this..."

Ciela looked up at her in a haze. Tomoko was now wearing a pair of thick, fluffy earmuffs.

"Here, would you like a pair?" She asked. "I always carry some with me..."

Something splashed in the water.

"Selene!"

The head of the blackhaired girl was coming out of the water. Tomoko stepped forward, hand outstretched towards her.

"Here, let me... DIGUSTING!" Tomoko reeled back as Selene raised her right hand, showing that she was carrying something with her.

Selene stepped out onto the shore, shaking herself dry, almost like a dog. Ciela looked up at her, shocked. She was still breathing heavily, completely exhausted. In her right hand, was the head and spine of the dreaded Lumiose Monoa.

"She already regenerated a body part once." Selene said contemptuously, as she threw the remains on the ground in front of her. "I wanted to make absolute sure I had killed her before I resurfaced."

"But that's DISGUSTING!" Tomoko whined, wrinkling her nose. "Did you just rip her head off, or what?"

"I did." She said. "It was too easy... she was not a powerful foe."

But... Lumiose Monoa was considered to be one of the most powerful fish people on the planet. Ciela thought faintly. To think there was someone out there who could dispatch her so easily, and in the water no less...

"Not powerful?" Tomoko repeated. "She had you on the ropes there. You nearly blew out our friend's ears!"

Selene looked (But wasn't she was blind?) at Ciela, who had not moved from her position. "Be thankful I was underwater at the time." She said. "You would not be alive if it had not filtered out the worst of it. And Tomoko... why was she not given earmuffs?"

She bowed again. "I'm so sorry!" She said quickly. "It completely slipped my mind, I really thought that you wouldn't have to- "

Selene gave her a dismissive wave, and she fell silent. "Regardless, it seems I have won." She said. "Is this really the best this... Black Sun have to offer?"

...

"One of the lights... it has disappeared?"

Anita lowered her pen. "What?"

She had been busy drafting a request for help to send out to her superiors, but she had been suddenly interrupted by this man.

"The light in the sky, the one that we could see from here... it's gone!"

"What?"

She leapt out of her chair and raced to the window. She pulled back the curtain and looked around. She ignored the large number of lizards still milling about outside to focus on the sky.

"Are you sure it is gone?" She asked him skeptically, as she peered upward. "Like, you were not being an idiot and looked in the wrong direction, right?"

"No, it's gone!" He said. "We posted a lookout to observe it and report if anything odd was happening, and now..."

"It is gone..."

She sat down back at her desk. "We must not get too carried away. There could be all kinds of explanations. But the fight is far from over."

She began amending her request to give a more accurate picture of what was going on in the colony.

They may have gotten lucky once, but that might not be the case for future battles.

"Three more to go..." She muttered as she lowered her pen to paper.

...

"One of the lights vanished?" Marionetta asked blankly.

She was standing in the middle of the Sons of the Sun HQ, a blanket folded across her. She was surrounded by several other citizens of the colony who had evacuated to the building.

"That's right." The soldier said. "Someone must have taken out whatever was causing it."

"Wow..." She whispered. "Was it one of your men?"

"We're not sure who did it yet." He admitted. "The talk is that Solaire might have gone and done it himself."

"I hope so..." Marionetta said quietly. "We're going to need him."

There were already many wounded soldiers being carried in. Despite the heavy golden armor each of them wore, it seemed that the creatures out there were more than capable of tearing them through with ease. If brought back, they were generally healed almost immediately, but if not...

Well, they were safe here, at least. She thought as she hugged the blanket closer to her. Even if all the soldiers... left them, they would still have the protective enchantments surrounding the building. Nothing could get in.

Her mother had left her to speak with whoever was in charge. That was so like her... she had to know everyone involved in the issue. She liked to feel involved.

Marionetta just wanted to go home already. She was already feeling very uncomfortable being surrounded by people she didn't know. But as much as she did not want to admit it, it seemed that the situation was far from resolved.

She stood up, thanked the guard for his time, and tried to find someplace quiet. Under some stairs, maybe. She often did that at school when she couldn't handle the sheer mass of people. She just had to get away from it all.

She headed to the hallway, and was disappointed to find that although it was smaller, it was somehow more cramped. Maybe she could find something further along in the passage that would be better suited to her need.

She bent her head down as she pushed her way through the hallway. The stairs, sadly, were not the sort you could slide in under. And even if she could, they weren't wide enough to for her to fit and to get the distance she craved from them.

Maybe upstairs...?

She looked upward. There weren't any people waiting on the stairs. So maybe there was something up there.

She climbed up, slowly, step after step, until she reached the top. There was a door here.

She opened it.

It was a small, empty room.

This... this was perfect. She thought happily, as she moved into the corner. Much preferable to her than that mess downstairs...

She let herself calm down for a couple of minutes, before her worries started to take another turn. How were her friends doing? Had they managed to find somewhere safe to hide?

First of all, Anita. She never had gotten into contact with Anita.

"Anita!"

Anita jumped, her pen clattering to the floor below. *"Marionetta?"* She asked sharply. She was quick on the draw. *"That is you, isn't it?"*

"Oh, you're alright!" Marionetta said. *"I was really worried..."*

She shouldn't have been, in hindsight. Most people didn't have sweet dreams while they're lives were in danger.

"Not quite alright." Anita said, as she folded the piece of paper in her hands. *"I got into a spot of trouble outside and need a little more time to recover."*

"But where are you?"

"The government building."

"Really?" That surprised her. *"Who is all there?"*

"Ciela's father, some city council members, lots of government employees."

"No civilians?"

"A few. Not many."

"Most must have come to the Sons of the Sun HQ... there are people everywhere."

"Is that where you are?"

"Yes."

"I see."

Anita leaned back in her chair. *"Have you spoken... or communicated with Ciela at all?"* She asked. *"Is she there with you?"*

"It was a while ago... I want to check up on her again."

She cut the connection with Anita and quickly focused on Ciela.

"Ciela!"

Ciela froze mid step, hardly daring to believe it. *"Marionetta?"*

Tomoko looked back at her, frowning. *"What's the matter?"* She asked. *"Is something wrong?"*

"Your telepathic friend... right?"

"That's right." Ciela said. "Can we stop for a moment, please?"

She focused back on the telepathic conversation. *"Marionetta, I'm so glad you're safe. I was worried. Are you alright?"*

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm in a secure location."

"That's fantastic!" Ciela told her. *"Hey, we just might have a lead on what's going on here! Have you ever heard of the Black Sun? Or Lumiose Monoa? We took out that ray of light, too..."*

"Slow down!" Marionetta yelped in alarm. The sudden influx of names and images she had never heard of before overwhelmed her.

"Did you just say... you were the ones who took out the beam?"

"Well, I had nothing to do with it. Selene took care of it."

She remembered Selene. The tall, beautiful girl who had stolen Rolf's heart without even speaking a word to him. She wished she were like that...

"Selene..." She still knew very little about her. She had hung around the colony for the past few weeks. No one could stop talking about her. She was elegant, beautiful, mysterious... and now, strong too. Even Ciela was in awe of her now.

What did Selene have that she didn't?

She tuned out without another word, not wanting Ciela to know just how upset she was. She just sat in the dark and cried.

...

"Marionetta?" Ciela repeated, baffled at the sudden lapse in conversation. "That's odd... she just tuned out."

"Did something happen?" Tomoko asked, looking uneasy. "Did something... get her?"

"Maybe." Ciela said. "She usually lets me know when she's not... I mean..."

She tried to gather her thoughts. "She said she was in a secure location." She said slowly. "But not exactly where..."

She had told her next to nothing, really. Where had she gone so suddenly? Perhaps her secure location wasn't so secure after all.

"We have to find her." Ciela said suddenly, looking up at her companions. "Something must have gotten to her--"

"No."

Tomoko looked sympathetic, but had said nothing. It had been Selene that put her foot down.

"What did you just say?" Ciela asked, her voice dangerous.

"We have no time for that." Selene said, her voice cool and collected.

"We must put an end to the Black Sun. We cannot afford any distractions."

"Distractions?" Ciela repeated, her hand clutching into a fist.

"Marionetta could be in danger!"

"Many more will be lost if we don't hurry." Selene said. She turned around, flicking her long black hair behind her. "It is not my responsibility to babysit those who can't fend for themselves..."

Ciela stepped forward, her hand clenched into a fist.

But before her blow could connect, Selene whirled around to face her.

"Touch me, and I will kill you."

Ciela halted mid step, lowering her fist.

(She... she's completely serious!)

"Hmph."

Selene turned away again, as if nothing had happened. Tomoko, however, seemed extremely agitated.

"Both of you, please... We can't fight each other!" She wailed.

"But we can let my friends die, right?" Ciela snarled.

"I never said that!" Tomoko insisted, sounding scandalized. "And neither did Selene!" She raised her hands, waving them around. "Really, please, please, please calm down..."

Ciela thrust her first outward, to the side, letting the energy she had built up loose. The sheer force of her magic sent the branches of a nearby tree straining backwards.

Tomoko gasped, holding her hand to her face. "Just... what was that?" She asked, sounding amazed.

Selene lowered her head. "If you wish to fight me, you better give it all your all..." She said. She hung her arms out, hanging paroral from her body. "But rest assured that I am not frightened of killing you..."

"Selene!" Tomoko moaned, her voice horrified. "Please, there's a better way!"

Ciela stared at her, considering her options. A part of her didn't want to back down, but Tomoko was right... they could not afford to fight amongst themselves.

Ciela relaxed, lowering her hands. "I'm sorry." She said. "You have a point. We can't let ourselves be distracted."

"That's good." Tomoko said, smiling at her warmly. She looked incredibly relieved. "Look, Ciela, I know how much your friends mean to you, but we need to think about the colony as a whole as well. Please, please, please understand that we can't let things like this get in the way of what needs to be done. Okay?"

What was this little speech? Ciela thought, looking at her curiously. What a strange girl.

"Hmph." Selene walked away, not even acknowledging them anymore.

Tomoko watched her go, and shook her head at Ciela. "Please forgive her." She said. "She does... not really understand how you're feeling right now. She's a good person, really."

Ciela certainly didn't think so. But now that she had calmed down, she was more disgusted with herself. She had almost struck another person purely out of spite.

True, she had been deeply wounded by Selene's complete dismissal of the issue, but that was no excuse to try and hurt her, especially since she had already helped make some real progress in vanquishing the darkness that plagued them. She didn't deserve to be attacked. Not over something like that.

She would have to make it up to her, somehow. But a part of her was still angry at her as well.

How could she be so cruel? She thought angrily. Just who was this girl, anyway?

She looked upwards, at the second trail of light they were following, and clutched her hand into a fist. The next witch they came up against would see the full extent her own power firsthand.

...

Anita had finally sent out the report by way of magical portal. She had sent it directly to the emergency response team. Whoever was on duty should immediately take it to whoever was available and rally the necessary forces.

Anita, however, did not have time to rest. She was ready to step back out onto the battlefield and take the fight to the Black Sun herself.

Marionetta had not gotten back into contact with her at all. That worried her. Doubtless her first order of business was to join investigate what had happened.

"I will be taking my leave shortly." Anita said, almost immediately after entering the conference room. "My energy has returned to me, and I desire to head back into battle."

Charles nodded. "Did you contact your superiors?"

"I did."

"I doubt they would approve of you risking your life for us."

She smiled. "Are you trying to find an excuse to keep me here, Governor?"

"I don't want you to risk your life unnecessarily." He said. "Ciela would never speak to me again."

She gave a surprised start. She knew that Ciela and Charles were not close. The fact that he was so concerned about her feelings was surprising to her.

"Please take care of yourself, Anita."

She bowed to him, respectfully. "Of course." She turned, and with her cloak billowing around her, she stepped out the front door.

Perhaps her first order of business was to take care of the snake men milling around there. And from there, she would worry about the Witches of the Black Sun.

She put the thoughts out of her mind as she walked out the door. She observed the Snake men patrolling the grass, and frowned. Her hair rose as the magic began to build up within her.

"Death comes for you all."

...

The tension between them had not lessened at all. There was still a very real tension between Ciela and Selene, one that was not tempered by Tomoko's attempts at breaking the ice.

There were creatures everywhere lurking in the woods. Giant carnivorous monkeys, dryads, and other things. None of them were bothering them. It seemed none of them were confident enough to try taking them on considering just what they had done to anything willing to try. An entire trail of corpses lay behind them. If anyone were to come looking for them, Ciela was certain it would be easy enough to track them down.

The trees overhead became more and more dense, until they couldn't see the sky at all.

"This isn't right." Ciela said. "The trees here aren't supposed to be this thick." She had often walked this path with Callisto. There were no trees like this in the colony.

Selene turned around. "Have you just now noticed that something is wrong?" She asked. "Our next target is near..."

"Wha-what?" Tomoko spluttered. "Really?"

She looked around frantically, as if expecting the Witch would just leap out and attack them.

"Relax." Selene said coolly. "She's just watching us."

She sounded completely at ease and in control of the situation. She was confident.

And now that she had seen her fight, Ciela was even more worried than she had been last time. Not for Selene's safety... but their own.

"Selene, you need to be more careful." Ciela said. "We don't know what we're up against. We need to get Tomoko somewhere safe before- "

"Don't."

Ciela stopped. Her mouth suddenly dry. Selene had shut her down with a single word. She simply didn't care.

Selene stepped forward, into the woods. "If you want to stay back, that's fine..." She said. "But I want to see what's in here for myself."

"Selene, wait- "

She ignored her and instead kept walking, her bare feet padding along the grass.

"Tomoko..."

She shook her head. "Don't worry about me." She said. "Surely Selene and you will be... more than enough to handle her." She still looked incredibly nervous despite her words. Did she believe them?

"I can't ask you to stay here, but I don't think we should- "

"No, I need to stay with Selene." She said. "I'd feel safer with her, honestly..."

"Fine." Ciela said. "But please be careful."

The light from the moon began to fade away almost completely as they stepped deeper into the trees. Dark roots from the trees stuck out of the ground, often causing them to change direction.

"This isn't natural." Ciela said again, looking around at the trees. They had suddenly become much larger and more intimidating. It made her feel small. "Magic is at work here."

"They're going to need more than overgrown trees to beat me." Selene said, chuckling darkly. "Oh, how they will need so much more..."

Ciela stared at her, her unease deepening. She desperately wanted to take Tomoko and run, but if Tomoko was unwilling there was nothing she could do.

"She comes...."

The sound came out in a whisper. Selene was standing slouched over again, in front of them, swaying back and forth.

The two of them fell silent. The atmosphere suddenly became even more tense. Something was in here with them. Something dangerous.

"Another witch..." Selene said again. "We barely got away from the last one. What will we do?"

Ciela looked at her, surprised. Her tone had suddenly shifted from smug overconfidence to outright panic.

What was going on? She thought wildly, staring at her. Her demeanor had completely changed in an instant. There was genuine fear in her voice.

"Selene?" Ciela asked. "What are you..."

"Whoever you are, leave us alone!"

Tomoko's voice was much louder than her own. Tomoko knelt to her knees and picked up a rock.

"Leave us alone!"

She threw it at the tree. Ciela shot her hand at towards her, grabbing her wrist. "What are you doing?" She hissed. "Don't antagonize... whatever it is!"

The girls seemed certain that something was in the area, watching them, and the feeling seemed to be infectious. Something was here, but it was not making itself known to them.

"Alright, that's enough!" Ciela shouted. "Show yourself or else!"

"Ha ha ha..."

Ciela looked up. There was a thick tree branch right above them. And someone was standing on the bottom of that branch.

"So you are the ones who murdered Monoa."

The figure disappeared as soon as it spoke. It almost seemed like it had never been there to begin with.

Ciela whirled around, desperately trying and find whoever it was.

"Ciela." Selene said, her voice calm and relaxed. "In front of you."

She jolted her eyes forward. The figure was indeed standing in front of her, giving her a wide bright smile.

"Hi!" She chirped. Ciela jumped back, completely surprised at her sudden appearance. The witch laughed as Ciela got into a fighting stance.

"You.... Who are you?" Ciela asked.

The witch was a very striking woman. Her long, bushy red hair was her most striking feature. It was wild and tangled, falling past her shoulders like a cozy blanket.

The woman was still smiling as she walked closer to her. "How funny." She said. "You look very familiar..."

The woman was way too close now. A lovely aroma of some kind of flowery perfume took her nostrils. This woman... knew who she was?

She looked closer at the woman's face. The distinct facial markings, and the long, red ears sticking out of her head looked very familiar.

"You are... a follower of Rose Karuma?" Ciela asked cautiously.

The woman's demeanor suddenly changed. "Huh. As if." She said. She pulled away, brushing the hair out of her eyes as she gave her a dirty look. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you would think that, since he was my first..." She twitched her ear, as if proving it. "But you really shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"What do you mean?" Ciela asked. "If you formed a pact with him that means you have to- "

"Serve him?" The woman laughed. "Please. I got what I needed from Karuma. He is nothing to me now. My sights are now set much, much higher."

She disappeared again, as suddenly as she came. Ciela flinched as warm, soft hands gripped her face from behind.

"Who are you?" Ciela asked, as the fingers traced over her skin.

"What do you want?"

Ciela did not move. One blow would be all she would need to finish it. But until that moment came... she may as well pick her brains for information.

"Rose Calanthe..." The woman purred. "Of the Black Sun."

Ciela clenched her hand into a fist. "So... you're one of them...."

"That's right." The woman said. "A long, dark shadow has descended upon this little colony, and we- "

Ciela brought her fist up, quickly, right towards her face. But the woman, still smiling, leaned slightly to the left as the blow sailed harmlessly past her. She had moved so quickly, Ciela did not have the time to even register her movement.

A magical force burst from her, sending Ciela flying. Tomoko let out a cry as Ciela spun around in midair, landing on her feet in a crouched position. Ciela glared up at the witch fiercely, who looked unimpressed.

"You think yourself a mighty warrior, I take it." Calanthe said. "But I think you are no match for me."

Ciela grimaced as she got back to her feet. "I think otherwise." She spat. "And I'm definitely not going to let you destroy this colony!"

"The colony?" The woman repeated, blankly. She then laughed again. "Oh, humans are so shortsighted." She said. "It comes with having such short life spans, I suppose.... They can never see the bigger picture..."

Ciela launched herself at her again, for another strike, but once again the woman sidestepped her blow, smiling all the while.

She was doing more than just dodging, Ciela realized. She was erecting a magical barrier to lower the power of her strikes.

The woman lashed her leg outward, catching Ciela in the stomach. She bent over in pain as another magical strike sent her flying again. She slammed against the tree, letting out a gasp of pain as she fell to the ground.

Calanthe lowered her arm, sighing. "You are not much fun to fight..." She said. "I was expecting more of a challenge."

She turned her head towards the other girls, considering them.

"Now who are you?" She asked. "You don't look familiar at all either."

Selene lowered her head, but did not respond. Tomoko looked at her frantically before turning her head back to the witch.

"I'm just... I'm just..."

"Just what?" Calanthe asked, putting a hand on her hips. "Spit it out, girl."

Just what was Selene doing? Ciela thought faintly as she staggered back to her feet. She had not moved at all since Calanthe had

stepped down from her perch. Tomoko was in very real danger.

"What about your friend here?"

Calanthe leaned forward towards Selene, frowning. "Look at me." She commanded. Selene did not move. "I said..."

Selene shot her head upward and spat right in the face.

Calanthe screamed in pain as she rubbed at her eyes. Selene smirked as her hair began to move. It writhed and shook and grew, reaching for Calanthe's neck and constricting around her.

She disappeared in yet another flash.

"Shame." Selene said, sounding bored. "Running away, are we?"

She was back to her old self. She bent her head over again, her hair falling across her face once again. "I know you're here..." She whispered, her voice low and sinister. "You can't hide from me..."

Tomoko had left her side and reached Ciela. She gently looked her over for injuries. "Nothing too serious." She said, running her hand over her clothes. "I... think?"

Ciela scowled at her.

"I'm sorry!"

Selene was standing still, not moving a muscle. "Where did you go?" She asked. "You were so excited to fight before..."

Tomoko tugged at Ciela's arm. "Come on." She whispered. "This could get ugly..."

"You've got that right!"

Tomoko squealed as Calanthe appeared right behind her, knocking Tomoko aside. She raised her hand and grabbed Ciela's neck, once more slamming her against the tree.

She hadn't been expecting that at all, and this time she had not been able to defend herself. Her head felt like it was split in two as it

slammed into the tree. She groaned in pain as her head slumped over. Her vision faded to black.

Calanthe looked down at Tomoko sobbing on the ground, considering what she was dealing with here. "This one... I'll let the beasts have this one."

She turned to face Selene again, smiling serenely, as she left Tomoko crying on the ground. "You were the one to beat Monoa, then?" She asked. "I never liked her, anyway. She never chewed her food."

"Despicable." Selene said. "You will soon join her."

"I really doubt that." Calanthe sniffed. "I am not nearly careless enough to let you near me. Not after that little stunt."

She raised her finger to her eye. "What a powerful toxin." She said. "I would have gone completely blind if I hadn't deflected it with my eyelid."

"Your... eyelid...?" Selene repeated, not understanding what she meant. Her poison was acidic. It should have burned through the skin.

"Yes." Calanthe said. "I used my eyelid to create a magical barrier."

Her magical ability was clearly stellar. To do something like that with such a small gesture marked a truly talented mage. Selene was starting to get excited again. Her fight with Lumiose Monoa had ended far too quickly for her liking... she had not had the chance to truly push herself.

"So who are you, exactly...?" Calanthe asked again. She pushed her fist under her chin in a thoughtful gesture. "You never came up in our- "

Selene dashed towards her suddenly, her arms spread wide. Calanthe, although surprised, did not panic. She backed up, waving her arms wildly. Waves of powerful energy blasts burst from her, keeping Selene at a distance.

Selene was not bothered by this. It wasn't a dangerous move; she was just trying to keep her at bay. She braced herself against the ground, her bare feet digging into the dirt, as she tried to weather the storm.

Calanthe disappeared again. But this time, Selene was more than ready for her.

Calanthe appeared behind her, her arms outstretched, but Selene spun her head around and bared her fangs. Calanthe, moving quickly, grabbed her face, and a powerful electric shock burst forward.

Selene screamed in pain, feigning agony despite feeling nothing. She bent her legs backward, folding them around Calanthe's waist, wrapping her legs around her.

"Wha- "

Calanthe stared as Selene's hair began to move, reaching for her face. She struggled for a bit as the hair wrapped around her, squeezing...

Her head completely popped off. Blood spurted everywhere as the hair gripped her skull even harder, crushing it into a pulp.

Selene pulled away, once more feeling a little bit underwhelmed. A great fight, a fantastic one, even. But being forced to end it so suddenly left a bad taste in her mouth.

She pulled away from the body, wondering just how much blood had gotten on her. Tomoko wouldn't be happy... she hated cleaning her clothes.

So that was two witches down. She thought, as her hair settled down again, falling back down across her back. She touched her mask, checking to make sure it was still there.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?"

The hands fell on her again, and the electricity again shot through her. Selene screamed in pain. This time, she actually felt it. The

voltage was a lot more intense this time around. She fell to her knees as the shock subsided, doing little more than twitching sporadically.

"You're full of surprises, aren't you?" Calanthe asked casually, as she kicked at her back. Selene fell, sprawled on the ground, her limbs bending at impossible angles.

"Poison spit, teeth that can tear flesh, impossibly flexible..." Calanthe smiled and shook her head. "Monoa probably thought of you as nothing more than an ordinary girl." She said. "But you're not normal, are you? You belong in a circus. You're a freak."

Selene did not respond. In fact, she did not move at all.

"Don't tell me that killed you?" Calanthe asked incredulously as she leaned in closer to her. "Hey, can you hear me?"

Selene's head and arms twisted around. She bared her teeth up at her enemy and snarled.

Selene lunged for her, her teeth going straight for her neck, but a simple wave of Calanthe's hand sent her pressed against the ground, as if a heavy weight had suddenly been slung on her back.

"Seriously, sweetie, you need to try something else." Calanthe said. "If it didn't work the first few times, why would you think it would work the next?"

Selene snarled as she bit and clawed, trying to push herself free. Even her hair was restrained by the force of the magic spell.

"You fight like a monster." Calanthe said thoughtfully. "You intrigue me."

The weight on her released. Selene crawled like a crab over to her and grabbed her leg.

"Ew."

Calanthe's foot slammed down onto her head, and Selene lay sprawled on the ground, her face in the dirt.

"I will not say this again." Calanthe said coolly, as she pressed her foot harder into her head. "So you better sit and listen." She smiled again, in spite of the pain she was causing her opponent. "You may not be a witch, but I'm sure we can make an arrangement for you in our little... friendship circle." She said. "I can tell you love chaos and fighting strong opponents. My friends and I are not so different."

Selene stopped struggling. Calanthe's smile widened.

"There will be a place for you in the new world." Calanthe went on to say. "For all of us."

She stepped away from her. "The decision is yours." She said. "It really would be a shame to see your strength go to waste."

She shot her once last smile before disappearing entirely.

"Selene!"

Tomoko was there, almost immediately. "Selene! Selene!" She flipped her over and looked her over. "Selene..."

Tomoko screamed as Selene jolted upright. "She has gone." She declared, turning around in a circle. Her hair was moving strangely, like the tentacles on an octopus. "Why?"

"Selene, please..." Tomoko pleaded. "Calm down, you're going to get her next time-"

"Next time?" Selene repeated. "What if there is never a next time? What if I never find her again?"

Ciela was standing by now as well, but she had to lean against the tree for support. She watched the events unfold before her with a wary eye.

"Selene..."

"I will go after her now." She said. "This is not over. She has not seen my true power..."

"Selene, no!"

"I will leave you now." Selene said, her voice chilly. "Stand by until I return."

"But- "

She was gone before Tomoko could even get the words out, racing through the trees at a furious speed.

Tomoko kneeled on the ground, too shocked to put her feelings into words. Ciela left the tree and approached her, limping all the while.

"Hey..." She said. "Are you alright?"

Tomoko nodded. "I am..." She said. "But Selene... Selene..." She shook her head.

"Can she not win?" Ciela asked gently. "Is that it?" Calanthe had soundly defeated them both with considerably little effort. It seemed neither of them had the training to resist such powerful magical strikes, and Calanthe was not easily outwitted.

Tomoko shook her head. "N-no." She said. "She could, I'm sure. It's just... Selene is... well... do you remember how she beat Monoa?"

"Yeah." Ciela said. "She just sort of... ripped her head off, right?"

"Well, no." Tomoko said. Ciela gave her a surprised look. "She was probably already dead by the time she did that. Selene wasn't joking when she told you that you would have died if her voice hadn't been blocked by the water."

"So..."

"What I mean to say is," Tomoko went on. "Is that Selene has this... habit... of forgetting that her powers are incredibly dangerous. She'll use everything at her disposal to take out her opponents, even if it puts other lives, or her own, at risk."

She clutched her heart, looking downcast. "She needs me to rein her in sometimes." She said quietly. "She simply does not understand that fighting with everything you have isn't always the answer."

She looked up at Ciela, suddenly. "Oh, but you're hurt!" She said quickly, as she jumped to her feet. "Um, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"No, it's fine." Ciela said. "I'm healing already, see?"

"Although she was by no means an expert, she had been focusing her powers on healing her injuries for the past several minutes.

"O-oh, I see." Tomoko said. She looked disheartened again. "If Selene couldn't beat that woman, who could?"

"Another witch, I would say." Ciela told her. "Someone who knows how to handle that sort of fighter, I think." She watched Tomoko intently. "Are you going to go into hiding, like Selene asked?"

"She is my superior." Tomoko sniffed. "So I suppose I must." She suddenly looked embarrassed. "Um, I can't fight for myself..." She said. "Would I be asking too much if I asked you to... walk me to safety?"

"Of course not." Ciela said warmly. "Come on. Let's get going."

Tomoko nodded vigorously and rushed back to the bear. "Maybe we can go get some more food, Ciela!" She said. "I'm getting hungry. How about you?"

She nodded. That did sound nice.

"Back to the restaurant?" Tomoko suggested.

"Anything could be waiting for us there." Ciela said. "No, let's go find my Dad. He's probably at the government building."

"Your dad?"

"That's right." She said. "His name is Charles North, he's a governor here."

"Really?" Tomoko looked flabbergasted. "He's letting you out here to fight these things?"

She laughed. "I don't need his permission to fight. Come on, let's go."

...

Anita had spent a little too much time taking caring of the Snake Men. She crept around the area, catching one at a time and taking them out.. Without the girl to worry about, it was easy. An hour's work had cleared the area entirely.

She sighed as she landed on the very highest tree branch in the area, the large number of snakemen bodies lay sprawled out beneath her. Now that she thought about it, Snakemen weren't pack hunters. It was very odd to see so many in one place...

If anyone needed to reach the government building, at least they would have an easier time of it. She noted that there were no Sons of the Sun guarding the area at all. The government people were all alone in there. Even in this critical hour the two groups wanted nothing to do with each other.

It was an odd situation that she still did not completely understand.

She had rested enough, she thought, as she climbed back to her feet. Now she should go find Marionetta. She was in the Sons of the Sun HQ, which was a little ways away. Nothing was in the sky. She should be able to fly there with no problems.

Her eyes fell on the three remaining golden rays of light. Up here, all of them were clearly visible. What did they mean?

Her curiosity piqued, she decided that it would be best to see just what was at the center of this mess. And then she could find Marionetta after she was done.

She had arrived at a decision. She shot forward towards the point where the beams collided.

...

Marionetta could not stop thinking about him. She felt so alone she just had to peer into his mind one more time.

He was still in the woods, a bow and arrow at the ready, waiting for... something... to appear. He had moved from where he had been

last time she had seen him, but he was still in hiding. He was following something.

She had been watching him for what felt like hours, but could not bring herself to reach out to him and let him know she was there. She knew how he felt about her. She was, to him, just a kid. She was of no real interest to him, and that knowledge destroyed her.

Every time she peered into his mind, she was made aware of this fact. And it hurt her.

She had learned a long time ago that prying into people's minds to see what they thought of her was mind numbing and exhausting. It always served as a reminder just how widely everyone around her harbored very harsh feelings towards her. Even her own mother.

"Can't she just be normal?"

"What did I ever do to deserve this..."

"Marionetta could have killed her- "

She shook her head, trying to get the thoughts out of her head. That was years ago. She had grown up a lot since then and had much more control over her powers. She no longer had to pretend to her mom that she was living an ordinary life in the colony by controlling everyone around her, she felt more at ease when among people, and she felt... normal.

But it was moments like this, she realized, that made her realized that she had never changed much at all. She still descended into little fits when something overwhelmed her and completely shut down, unable to do anything.

Nothing had changed. Nothing will ever change. Nothing will ever change for her. She would never change. She was nothing.

She cried.

...

Ciela was becoming increasingly nervous.

They had been walking for quite some time, and were nowhere near their destination. Despite that, she could tell that the creatures who had, at first, been reluctant to come anywhere near them now saw them as vulnerable.

Many pairs of eyes were watching them, but they kept themselves hidden among the leaves. Many different kinds of creatures were lurking about, just out of sight. All of whom wanted to tear at their flesh.

Tomoko, however, seemed happily oblivious about the danger surrounding them. "What do you like to eat, Ciela?" She asked. "If they have anything to work with, I'll gladly make you something. It's the least I can do."

"I'll eat anything, really." Ciela replied. "I'll leave it up to you."

"Alright!" She said, smiling, clapping her hands together. "Selene always asks for meat... it'll be nice to try something a little different."

Ciela nodded, her mouth dry. A long, thick tail had dived down into the bushes behind Tomoko's head. Whatever that thing was, it was probably twice their size. How could something that big be so stealthy?

How far was it to the Sun building? Well... she had only been there a handful of times, but she was the one more familiar with the colony. She would have to pull through for Tomoko this time and find the way on her own.

"This looks familiar..." She said, as they came to a large tree. "I think I made out with my boyfriend here once..."

Tomoko scowled at her. "Lucky you." She sniffed. "But how will that help us?"

"We went back to the Sun building afterward." She said slowly. "In the car..."

In fact, they had been here several times. And they always came and went in the same direction...

"Here!" She said proudly, as she pointed out some tire tracks. "It's a straight shot from here!"

Tomoko looked impressed. "Wow." She said. "That's great!" She put on a little, knowing smirk. "Maybe your boyfriend will be there?" She suggested. "What's he like, anyway?"

Ciela blushed, unable to meet her curious, eager gaze. "I guess... he's..." It was kind of hard to describe their relationship. They had only just met, but it somehow felt as if they had been together forever. Despite how much fun she had around him, and how much they talked, she didn't feel as if she knew him very well at all.

"He's really young, but he's really high up on the chain of command for the Sons of the Sun." She said. "He personally assists Solaire."

"Really?" Tomoko asked. "That guy? What was his name...?" She scratched her cheek, thinking deeply. "All I know about him is that he's hot."

They grinned at each other. Tomoko was a bit rambunctious, but a good person at heart.

"I have to say though, I liked that guy who came to that meeting with you." Tomoko said thoughtfully. "He was big and- "

"We can talk about boys later." Ciela said hastily. Bringing up Rolf reminded her of Marionetta, who was very likely in trouble. "We need to get to safety."

"R-right..."

She hoped she would find some sign of Marionetta there in the building.

...

Anita was not entirely sure what she was looking at.

She had reached the point of convergence and had certainly found something very strange. It was, however, beyond her understanding.

The energy above spiraled down from above over three different point. Each of these rays got larger and larger as they lowered, until they formed an entire crystal around the area.

It was some kind of... shield. Or perhaps, more accurately, a wall. It was some kind of intense protection spell. But what were they protecting?

Although the light from the rays was bright, she could make out a figure standing in the middle of it. She could make out very little other than that besides the fact that its arms were raised high, far over its head.

"Now this is interesting." A voice behind her said softly.

Anita stopped. Pulling away, she raised her hood as she faced the owner of the voice. "Greetings." Anita said, trying to keep her voice calm. "Are you with the Black Sun?"

She already knew who it was. It was Rose Calanthe, And she was looking very amused. She coiled a strand of hair around her finger as she smiled at her.

"You know Anita." She said casually, as she took a small, dainty step towards her. "There's no need to be a stranger."

Anita winced., desperately wanting to take a step back, away from her. She had very much hoped that Calanthe had not recognized her. She reached her hands upward to lower her hood and glared at her. "If I must." Anita said haughtily, venom in her voice.

"Now that's better." Calanthe purred. She stepped closer to Anita, reaching out a hand toward her. She ran her hand over Anita's face, stroking it gently. "So you haven't been accepted by Karuma yet." She said. She almost sounded disappointed. "That's a shame. Natalie had such high hopes for you."

"A shame?" Anita repeated. "You are a traitor. You have no right to- "

"Believe it or not, Anita." Calanthe went on to say, interrupting her.

"But I was actually one of your biggest advocates from the very

beginning." She brushed the hair out of her eyes in that oh so familiar way. She had been famous for it, Anita recalled. She could never stop playing with her hair.

"You what?"

"You and I really aren't that different." Calanthe went on. "No, no, don't give me that look. Hear me out."

She held her hand out. A flame burst out, and the familiar symbol of Rose Karuma came into shape. A bright red fox holding a gorgeous rose in its mouth. Anita felt a little sad as she looked at it. It had been years since she had seen anything with that image emblazoned on it.

"I was nine when I came to the Garden." Calanthe said. "You know how hard it is to start training at that age ... perhaps even more than I, to be honest." Calanthe smiled warmly. "I won't attack you if you don't attack me." She said. "Relax a little. You certainly don't look well."

She knew better than to trust Rose Calanthe, and kept her guard up. Calanthe sighed.

"You know me too well." She said. "But I'm being sincere. Look, Anita, I know how badly you want to be a witch. How could I not? You were the only thing anyone was willing to talk about that year. How you defied the odds and awakened your power despite being past the ideal age. How you excelled in your studies and reached the point where you could compete with other candidates your own age, despite the four-year difference in training."

Anita said nothing.

"However..." Calanthe said. "You haven't been able to take that last step. Have you? To reach my level... to form a pact with Karuma and truly become one of us."

"I do not want to reach your level." Anita said coldly. "I want to surpass you."

Calanthe smiled. "Of course you do." She said warmly. "And that's why I was so happy when I saw you here. Anita, what if I told you... that a more powerful being, infinitely more powerful than Rose Karuma, was on its way here right now?"

Anita stiffened.

"What?"

Could that be...

She cast a look behind her, at the crystal behind her.

"Our Leader is making the preparations now." Calanthe said casually. "Here, let me show you..."

Anita screamed as Calanthe lashed out and grabbed her hand. Ignoring her, Calanthe ran her finger along her wrist.

A drop of blood spurted out.

"Wha- "

"Shhh." Calanthe murmured. "Just watch."

She did as she asked and watched as the drop of blood dripped down her hand, across her finger, and then fell to the ground.

She watched, confused for a moment, as it just lay there. But after a moment it began to smoke, and it disappeared.

"Wha- "

"You probably came here to investigate what was happening." Calanthe said, wrapping her arm around her, leading her back to the barrier. "Allow me to explain it, please."

"The blood disappearing..." Anita muttered. "Like... a summoning?" But that couldn't be right. There was no circle.

"That's exactly right." Calanthe said, nodding. "You're a bright girl. Yes, the blood that is being spilled all over the colony, both from the beasts and colonists, is feeding the circle."

"Circle?" Anita repeated blankly. "But there is no- "

"Look up."

She did, frowning. "I don't- "

She stopped. Her heart began to race. The lights. The lights were making up the circle.

"It's a bit unorthodox." Calanthe said. "But it's imperative we get it as wide as possible. So the sacrifices we make are not in vain."

"Wide as possible..." Anita repeated. Her mouth was dry. "How... big is it...?"

"Thirty miles." She said. "Or at least, if we walked from here to the boundary of the circle, that would be thirty miles. So that would total about..."

A thirty-mile radius." She thought faintly. Most summoners could not handle anything larger than a car. The very thought of such a monstrous undertaking horrified her.

"What in the world are you summoning?"

Calanthe laughed. "Oh, I'm getting a little ahead of myself." She said. She pulled away from her and walked some distance away.

"Anita, you have a lot of talent. It would be a waste to spend your life serving a creature as fickle as Rose Karuma."

Creature... the contempt in her voice was palpable. Anita's curiosity got the better of her. "Calanthe... why do you loathe Rose Karuma so much?"

Calanthe smiled at her, and this time it was much less wide and exaggerated. It seemed more sincere somehow.

"Why does one hate another?" She asked herself. "He did me wrong. He does us all wrong, and no one cares or tries to change anything."

She brushed her hair again. She seemed sentimental, all sudden.

"I have met him twice in my life." She said. "It... was wonderful. While it lasted. But there are other men out there, and I grew tired

of waiting for him to remember me. I was nothing to him; despite everything I did in his name. And so I left."

"Other men?" Anita repeated, scandalized. "But that's- "

"You always have been a prude." Calanthe sniffed. "You try too hard to be like Natalie. Relax. It's only a breach of contract if Karuma finds out about it."

"But if that happens, you'll die!"

"That's not going to happen." Calanthe said firmly. "Especially after tonight."

She waved her hand outward, gesturing to the crystal. "Anita." She said. "Please, you don't need to do this to yourself."

Anita reached for her hood and raised it, hiding her face from view. "You sound just like Ciela." She said softly. "You really do think you know what's best for me..."

"Anita." Calanthe said. Her previous warmth evaporating in an instant. "Choose your next words carefully."

Anita raised her hand and fired off a bullet at her. Calanthe raised her own and smacked it aside, sending it crashing through a tree. It sliced in two from the sheer force of the attack. It fell to the ground with a mighty crash.

"Actions speak louder than words, Rose Calanthe." Anita said. "If you truly wish to slaughter every last person in the colony, I have no intention of joining you. No matter what you offer me."

"Is that your final answer?"

"Of co--"

She never even got the words out. Before she had even realized what had happened, Calanthe was right there, in front of her, not even an inch away, glowering at her. She raised her hand and slapped her across the face.

"Stupid girl." She snarled. "I was wrong about you. I thought you were better than this."

Anita brought her hand back for another attack. "I am!"

Calanthe raised her other hand to block Anita's strike, and then hit her again, but this time with real magical force. Anita slammed into the barrier behind her. It was incredibly hot, and painful to the touch. She screamed in pain as she tried to pull herself away from it.

But once more, Calanthe was there. She grabbed head and left shoulder, and whirling her around, slammed her face first into the barrier. She screamed as Calanthe pressed her face down on the surface. It was scalding hot. She struggled in vain to push herself away, but Calanthe held her firmly in that position for several, agonizing seconds.

Anita pulled her back and then slammed her face back into it. It felt like she was being slammed against a rock.

Calanthe wrapped her arm around her and yanked her away. She pushed her onto the ground pressed her foot against her face. Anita's face was horribly scarred and burned. She could not even speak. She could only let out a weak whimper.

"Well?" Calanthe asked, as she cruelly twisted her foot into Anita's nose. She whined as she tried to push her body off her. The burns made the torture even more painful.

"You have made a very serious mistake, sweetie." Calanthe said quietly. "I offered you freedom and you chose to spit in my face."

Anita tried clawing at her leg, desperate to get her tormentor off her. Calanthe, enraged, lashed out at her neck, stomping down on it.

Anita would have died, right there, if Calanthe had not stopped the instant her heel touched her neck. She lay there, completely still, eyes wide with fear, as she looked up at her.

"Not so bold now, are you?" Calanthe asked quietly.

Anita had felt it. She had seen her life flash before her eyes. She let out another whimper.

"I have to admit; I should have struck you down the instant I saw you flying by." Calanthe said. "But I just couldn't help but reach out to you."

She twisted the heel of her feet deeper into Anita's neck. She let out a pained whimper as the spike dug down deeper.

"It's always harder to kill someone you know personally." She remarked, brushing the hair out of her eyes again. "Especially when you actually quite like them."

She raised a single finger and an energy burst forward. It sliced through Anita's cheek, causing a shallow cut to form. A drop of blood fell to the ground.

"I suppose I could just keep you alive." Calanthe pondered aloud, as she cut Anita's other cheek. "And slowly offer up your blood to the Great One." The blood that had dripped down from her cheek was already starting to smoke and evaporate.

"Ha!" Anita shouted. She gave everything she had into one, forceful burst of magical energy from her being, trying to throw Calanthe off her.

But to Calanthe, it was nothing. Her hair didn't even move. "You really are desperate, aren't you?" She asked. "You truly would rather die than rethink your life. "

Calanthe shook her head sadly.

"You're a stubborn one, alright." Calanthe sighed. "But you never would have gotten this far if you weren't, I suppose."

She looked down at her, as if she were pitying her. "I would have really liked to see you become a witch." She said. "Those stuffy council members never thought you could even get close, but here you are."

"I am... not close..."

"Don't say that." Calanthe said, sounding horrified. "Never say that. It isn't your fault that Karuma has not come for you."

She pulled away, her feet landing nearly on the ground. Anita found her body being lifted into the air by some magical force, into a standing position. And Calanthe wrapped her arms around her.

"Never blame yourself for other people's wrongs." She said. "Karuma is to blame, not- "

"No."

Anita, in spite of the pain, the burns in her face, the cuts, the damaged throat, managed to spit out that one word. More followed.

"My fault... My fault..."

Calanthe's expression suddenly became very cold. "So that's how it is." She said quietly, as her hands twisted around Anita's body in an iron grip. "You are no different than the rest."

She let go of Anita, but instead of falling to the ground, as she should have, she soared up, up, up, up into the sky. Above the trees, higher and higher until Calanthe was nothing more than a tiny little speck on the ground.

"Goodbye, Anita!" She cried. "Have a nice trip!"

She brought her arm down. Anita screamed as the wind pushed past her face as she sped straight back down to her feet.

(No, I can't... give up here...)

"Ha!"

She halted in place, ten feet above the ground, but the sudden lurch caused her to feel sick and nauseous. Her eyes rolled back and she felt like she was growing to puke.

She did.

"Ew! Disgusting!"

Anita fell the remainder of the ten feet and landed on her shoulder. It cracked painfully as she rolled onto her back, completely wiped

out.

(Just kill me already)

The pain was indescribable. She could not even feel her arms or legs. She had gone completely numb.

Heal... she needed to heal herself... she could do nothing else but besides to recover her wounds. But there was so much wrong with her it was hard to figure out where to start. She needed someone else to look her over.

Her burns... would have to wait. She needed to be able to move again, before-

Calanthe was standing over her, glaring down at her, an enraged expression on her face.

"Is this how you're going to go out?" She asked, enraged. "Pathetic."

She kicked her stomach. Anita cried out as blood spurted out of her mouth. She lay there on the ground, completely unable to move, as blood trickled down her chin.

"I think I want you to suffer now." Calanthe told her, as she raised her hand. Sparks began to fly from her fingertips, making a horrifyingly intense crackling sound.

And then she lowered her hands, considering her. "Nah." She said. "I think lying here, thinking about your life will be the worst punishment.

She turned heel and disappeared.

Anita coughed again. She did not have the energy to recover after all. She needed real rest, and real attention from a healer. All she could do with the energy she had left was not die.

It was unbelievable how Anita thought in amazement. Well, Calanthe wasn't one to stick around if things didn't go her way.

If she had truly disappeared, then the only thing she would have to worry about was the fire.

The fire crackled overhead. She couldn't let it burn. It could cause a real wildfire. But she couldn't even move her own arms, let alone muster up the energy to put it out.

There had to be some... some way of taking out the fire without using magic. Or moving at all.

Marionetta...

If she could get a hold of Marionetta, she could ask for someone to come help her. But the communication between them was a one-way street. Only Marionetta could initiate a conversation.

Until then... she would sit here and try not to die.

...

Calanthe had disappeared completely. Confused, Selene sniffed the air, trying to pick up her scent. Bizarrely, it was like she had never been there to begin with.

"Calanthe!"

She sighed. Her claws shifted back into an ordinary hand and her hair settled down. Seeing her prey run away from her had her feeling very put out. She had been prepared to go all out this time. Alone, where no one could bother them.

Calanthe must be able to teleport... she was not sure how to deal with that. If Calanthe could just get a hold of her prey, she could make her fall. She knew she could. But she had never tracked prey such as this.

And to make matters worse, unlike last time, she had not the slightest clue as to where she had gone. Last time she had left them, she had traveled by foot and was easy to track. This time... there was nothing.

Was this how their duel was going to end? With a draw? The mere thought boiled her blood.

The fire licked at her body, enveloping it almost completely. She paid it no mind. She had more pressing problems.

How to find Calanthe.

She walked through the fire slowly, deep in thought, her bare feet stepping straight into the flame. There had to be something, something she could use to find her.

Perhaps she was masking her scent with something else. Another creature, perhaps. But there were countless numbers of them all around. How was she to find out which was her prey?

Her mind was beginning to clear. Although her bloodlust had not been sated, she would have to make do with the fact that her opponent was not here, and it may take a little while longer to meet her again. Until then, there were plenty of other things in this forest to fight...

She licked her lips hungrily. Yes, yes. There were plenty of fights to be had today. Calanthe could wait, just a little while. There were many others.

She had stepped out into the field. She could feel the raw energy of something magical in front of her, and stepped closer to investigate. She found a person lying down on the grass some distance away.

Calanthe? She thought, her senses sharpening. Had she died of fright?

No, she realized quickly. It was not Calanthe, but another girl. A human girl. And she was very badly injured. She could smell the scent of burnt flesh on her.

Selene's first instinct was to leave her. She had no reason to stay and look after a dying girl. But a part of her wondered, ever so faintly, if this small girl was set as a trap by Calanthe. Perhaps she was expecting to come investigate the body and lend assistance.

Well, in that case, she may as well play along.

She approached the girl, her bare feet hurriedly padding against the grass. "Oh my!" Selene said. "Are you alright?"

The girl moaned. It seemed to be a word, but Selene couldn't quite make it out.

"You're going to be okay." Selene told her, as she knelt by her side. She reached out and touched the burn marks on the girl's face, the girl moaned again and pulled away. Selene quickly pulled away. "Forgive me." She said. "Can you speak? What's your name?"

The girl did not answer. A gurgle came out of her throat, but no words came out. What was her problem? Selene thought irritably. Was this a part of Calanthe's trick? Or perhaps she was already a corpse, and Calanthe had brought her back as a zombie? That would explain the extensive damage, anyway.

"Do you know anything about the witch that was here?" Selene asked, keeping her voice soft, warm, and gentle. "About Rose Calanthe?"

That got a livelier reaction out of her. The girl suddenly had a fire in her eyes. Selene took that as a positive sign.

"Can you tell me which way she went?" Selene asked. "I want to kill her."

That must have been too sudden of a change in tone, Selene realized. The girl stiffened. "Relax." Selene cooed. "I'm only joking... I'm not going to leave you."

The girl clearly did not believe her. She was looking at her with deep distrust, and her heart was beating faster and faster. She was frightened of her. Perhaps Selene should have left her here after all.

So she wasn't part of some elaborate trap after all. She thought in disappointment, as she stood back up. She was just a scared little girl. There was nothing of interest here.

She walked away from her, careful to stay far away from the powerful magical energy. She could sense that touching it would be a bad idea.

"Wait- "

She stopped. "Yes?" She asked. Why didn't she just talk right away? She thought.

"The... Black Sun..."

"That's what they call themselves." Selene said, as she knelt back down next to her. "Can you tell me where to find them?"

"No... don't.... fight them..."

"Why not?" Selene asked.

"They... summon... horrible..."

Selene shook her head. The girl was not being of any help at all. "I don't understand." She claimed. "If you have nothing useful to say to me, I have no reason to stay."

The girl shot her arm out towards her, grabbing her arm. Selene almost killed her, right then and there, but she managed to restrain herself. The girl's grip was weak and brittle. Not at all threatening, she was just trying to get her attention.

"Lights..." She whispered. "In the sky... Summon..."

Nothing but gibberish. This girl was no help at all. But she seemed intent on telling her something. "Please..." She rasped. "Wait here with me..."

Her voice was beginning to clear up. It seemed that, despite her injuries, the girl could focus enough to heal her wounds by using magic.

Selene had no other leads. She sensed no other witches in the area. So she knelt by her and sat completely still. The girl closed her eyes, and the burns on her face slowly began to fade away.

It took almost an hour for the girl to feel well enough to move. She sat up, wincing a little, as she turned her head to face Selene.

"Thank you for waiting." She said, nodding her head. She was far from completely recovered, but at least she could sit up. "It must not have been easy for you."

Selene could tell that the girl was trying hard to not get on her bad side. She put a lot of consideration into each word and spoke softly, gently, warmly. But it was a farce: she wasn't sure what to make of her.

"I'm looking for Rose Calanthe." Selene said, cutting straight to the point. "Do you know where I can find her?"

The girl looked down. Her hands were still burned. "Rose Calanthe was the one who did this to me." She said bitterly. "She completely destroyed me. Her magic is incredible."

"You didn't answer my question..."

"I do not." She said. "She disappeared just as suddenly as she arrived. Calanthe is a witch following..." She hesitated. "A witch who has made a pact with Rose Karuma. She will be very difficult to find if she does not wish to be found."

"A Rose..." Selene said thoughtfully. "Their coven has been allied with humanity for years. Why has this woman attacked a human settlement?"

The girl suddenly seemed angry. "A traitor." She declared. "She is nothing but a dirty traitor who abandoned us for her own pleasure."

It was the sort of reaction someone had when strong feelings were had. This girl knew Calanthe very well, at least by reputation. But Selene also knew that this girl was not a witch. She was human. So what was her relationship with Calanthe?

"You say she is a traitor... can you elaborate?"

The girl nodded, but then immediately winced. Apparently, the gesture was extremely painful. "When a Witch forms a pact with her master, she is duty bound to serve his will." She said. "Calanthe has turned her back on Rose Karuma and the others in our coven. She deserves to be killed."

On that, they quite agreed.

"Your name... is Selene, is it not?" The girl asked her. "My name is Rose Anita."

That's right. This was the same girl who had killed the monster she had been sent her to hunt. She had not recognized her due to her injuries, particularly the raspy voice.

But this girl, Anita, had managed to single handedly kill the beast, but had struggled to overcome Rose Calanthe. Anita was no pushover. Selene wondered how powerful Calanthe was to toss someone around like that so easily.

"I am Selene." She said quietly. "I fight monsters."

Anita nodded. "You sat by me..." She asked. "I owe you my thanks."

She bowed her head. Selene didn't know what to make of it. "Okay." She said. "Earlier you said something about a... summon. What did you mean by that?"

Her expression suddenly darkened. "We must kill each member of the Black Sun, and quickly." She said. "The whole world is at risk."

...

"Miss North!"

Ciela waved at the men standing in front of the building. Although they did not leave their post, they were clearly glad to see them. Each of the four men were dressed in bright golden armor and were carrying Sun Guns.

"I'm sorry I'm late." Ciela told them. "I was busy investigating the issue myself. Is Solaire around? I need to speak with him."

No one answered. Something was wrong.

"What is it?" She asked sharply. "Is he- "

"He's missing." One of the soldiers said. "No one has seen him since the incident began."

Ciela crossed her arms. "How strange." She said. "What a time for him to not be here..."

"What about your boyfriend?" Tomoko suggested. "Maybe he knows something?"

"Callisto... is not here." The soldier said. "But we have received instructions from him since the attack."

"What?" Ciela had honestly thought he would be here, helping plan the counterattack. "Where is he?"

"Trying to request reinforcements from the capital, no doubt." The soldier said. "He was very clear with us: Do not engage the enemy, focus on making sure innocent lives are saved. Help is on the way."

From the capital? That was the last thing she wanted. "If we all band together, surely we can overcome them." She argued. "We've already killed one- "

The man shook his head. "We are trained to deal with monsters and natural disasters." He said. "Witches are beyond us. We cannot help you... we would be throwing our lives away."

She almost called them cowards, but she bit her tongue: she herself had been absolutely torn apart by Rose Calanthe due to her extraordinary magical powers. And she was far, far stronger than any fighter relying on technology could ever be. It was not an act of cowardice, but of practicality... they were better suited to escorting citizens to safety, not take on the source of the problem. She could not blame them for trying to help to the best of their ability.

It would be up to her, then. She thought bitterly, as she clutched her fist. To rise up, and take out these parasites once and for all.

"I understand." She said stiffly. "Tomoko."

"Y-yes!"

"Go inside and stay there. I'll see you when this is over."

"W-what?" Tomoko stammered. Her hand shot up over her mouth in shock. "Without any rest?"

Ciela shook her head. "We can't wait." She said. "If we wait any length of time, things will spiral out of control. I'm sure of it." She

turned around, giving a small wave. "Take care of her." She said to the soldiers. "I'll be back, don't worry. Just keep Tomoko safe while I'm gone- "

"Ciela!"

She turned back around, confused. A familiar face was standing on top of the stairs. "Marionetta!" She said, surprised. Marionetta raced down the stairs towards her, much faster than she would have thought possible, and she threw herself at her. Ciela yelped in surprise as Marionetta wrapped her arms around her in a deep hug. "I'm so glad you're here!" Marionetta told her. Despite her sincerity, she could not help but feel embarrassed. Marionetta was crying.

But not tears of happiness, she realized quickly. She held Marionetta close and tried to think of something to say. "Marionetta..." She said. "What's wrong?"

"It's Anita!" She said. She sounded absolutely horrified. "I checked in on her, and... and... she's in incredible pain!"

"What?"

Ciela gripped her much harder than she probably should have. Marionetta cried out as her shoulder was pinched by her incredible power. "What happened?" Ciela demanded, her voice raised. Marionetta flinched away from her, her eyes downcast. She did not respond! "Answer me!" She shook her.

"Ciela!" Tomoko said. Her previous airy, friendly demeanor was gone. Panic took its place. "Stop it! You're hurting her!"

Ciela relaxed almost immediately, letting go of her entirely. "I'm... sorry, Marionetta." She said. "Are you alright?"

Marionetta nodded. Her lip quibbled. She looked as if she might start crying again. "Anita..." She muttered. "Is at the center..."

"Center?" Ciela repeated. "The center of what?"

"The point where all four lights become one." She said nervously. She twitched. "She is there."

"But what happened to her?"

"Rose Calanthe..."

The name hung in the air. "I need to get to her." Ciela said. "There's no telling what will happen if we wait any longer." She was no medical expert, but bringing Anita to safety would be imperative.

"You're going alone?" Marionetta repeated. She sounded amazed.

"Of course." Ciela said. "No one else here is qualified, I would say. I'll just go pick her up and then come back here." She smiled at Tomoko. "Maybe you can get dinner ready in the meantime."

"Yeah, of course!"

"But Ciela... how long will you be gone?"

"An hour at most." She promised. "I'll be back before you know it."

She turned and dashed off, back into the forest. "Ciela!" Marionetta shouted. "Be careful!"

She was already gone. How was she so fast? Marionetta thought faintly, unable to look away from the spot where she had disappeared. Surely it had something to do with her powers...

"She'll be fine." Tomoko told her. "Don't worry, okay? She got me through those woods, she can handle herself."

"Calanthe crushed her." Marionetta muttered. "Ciela must avoid fighting her..."

"What? How do you know that?"

Marionetta turned away from her, unwilling to answer.

...

She was not holding back now. Her rage was

The creature who had tried to attack her the instant she stepped into the woods was now lying in a limp heap at her feet. All three of its heads agape.

"Don't you ever learn?" Ciela asked as she kicked it one last time. She had killed whatever it was with a single blow.

The creatures had suddenly become much more aggressive. The next creature stepped from the shadows, its fangs bared. Each of its three heads was of a different animal; A bull, a lizard, and a lion. Each head snarled and spit at her.

"Do you want to end up like your friend?" She asked it. "Come on, now."

It did not seem to regard her warning at all. It leapt to her, its bull horns aiming to gore her. But Ciela lashed her fist, catching it between the eyes and sending it flying away, slamming into a tree.

It got back up, dazed, and Ciela decided she had shown it enough mercy. "Take this!"

She leapt forward with a flying kick, catching it right on one of its necks. It roared in pain as her leg pierced its skin, and she swung it upward, severing it.

She flipped herself around and watched as the lizard head fell to the ground. The other two heads writhed about in panic. She hit it again, on the side of its body, causing it to shudder in pain.

It fell after she had turned and walked away. "Where was I going, again...?"

She had to climb a nearby tree to her bearings, and unfortunately stumbled across something equally nasty.

"Scree!"

"Ah!"

The Eagle flapped its wings at her roughly, its sharp beak raised. It was about the size of a person, and was clearly not afraid of her.

Ciela kept her distance, eyeing it warily. It stared at her. It did not seem aggressive, but it would attack if she stepped further into its territory. Behind it lay a surprisingly lovely little nest. She could hear little chirps coming from it.

"You're not a monster." She said slowly. "You're just trying to protect your home too, aren't you?"

She ended up finding another tree to look around and get her bearings. As Marionetta had told her, the lights seemed to converge at a single point. However, she could clearly see from here that many of them did cross paths. What she was looking for was the point where all of them met.

"Hold on, Anita... I'm coming!"

"Maybe I can help?"

"Marionetta!"

"Maybe I shouldn't have let you run off." Marionetta said. "I was so shocked, I didn't mention it to you... but someone else is looking after Anita right now, and she's recovering."

"And you didn't tell me this... why?"

"She still needs help!" Marionetta insisted. "Look, she's with the monster girl Selene. She can protect her, but she has no medical knowledge to speak of. What you need is someone to fix her up. She can't even really move right now, she's in really bad shape."

"Selene, huh..." She wondered if Marionetta had seen Selene fight. She was not all knowing, but she did often make a point of observing as much as possible. She always knew things she shouldn't-

"What?"

She could see everything she was thinking... this was ridiculous. She thought irritably. Marionetta needed to stop reading her every little thought and mind her own business.

"Excuse me for trying to help!"

Ciela moaned. This was not the time for this argument. She needed Marionetta to keep in contact with the others. She still had no idea where Callisto or Rolf were, and if Anita was moved before she reached her, she would have no way to track her down.

"That's all you care about? How you can use me?"

She sounded accusatory. This was absurd. Ciela thought. Marionetta seriously wouldn't take this personally, would she?"

"Yes I would."

What was she supposed to do to placate her? She thought irritably. She could not hope to calm her down if she was reading her every thought. They needed to work together.

"What would I be able to do for you?" Marionetta asked. "I'm immature, aren't I? That's what you think about me."

Ciela froze, completely shell shocked. *"I didn't mean to offend you- "*

"It's true, isn't it?" She asked. She sounded even more upset. "I can't do anything for the colony. All I can do is sit here and watch as people I care about get hurt."

"Marionetta, I- "

"I'm worthless." She went on. *"I can't protect my home, I can't protect my mother, I can't protect my friends... I'm worthless!"*

"I never said that- "

"But you think it, don't you!"

"It's true that I don't think you can help directly." Ciela said, her thoughts frantic. "But you can help us keep in touch with each other. You are invaluable in this situation, please calm down."

"So you just want to use me after all?"

This girl was out of control.

"You're unbelievable!"

She was being unreasonable, Ciela fumed. She wasn't listening to her at all.

Had she read her thoughts just then?

She wasn't responding.

Ciela waited a while, waiting for her to say something, but nothing came. Marionetta had taken her ball and gone home, so to speak.

"Marionetta..."

Ciela couldn't blame her for being stressed, but taking it out on her wasn't going to fix anything. They needed to work together, after all. She was too sensitive: If she was going to read people's minds, she was going to have to learn that sometimes she wouldn't like what she saw.

She wondered if this was why Marionetta had issues connecting with Rolf, even though they got along well whenever they did speak to each other. Knowing Marionetta, she would completely freak out if Rolf noticed she had something stuck in between her teeth or anything stupid like that.

She had been standing in this tree for several minutes. It was time to get going. She had found the way, so she simply jumped back down and set off again, sprinting to her destination.

She would be there soon. She had to be.

...

"It is moving."

Selene was half asleep and bored out of her mind. She did, however, pick up on her word. "What is?"

"Look."

She tilted her head upward, the same way that Anita had when she told her to look. Upward... so that meant...

"The beam of lights?"

"Yes." Anita said. "Do you realize what that means?"

She did not. "Enlighten me."

"Think." Anita said, looking a little annoyed. "Each witch has summoned a beam of light from her person to draw a summoning

symbol in the sky. Obviously, having one move means that a witch is changing position."

She could not believe that it was that easy to track down each and every one of these witches. She deeply wished that she could see them for herself. If what Anita had said was true, Rose Calanthe had one as well.

"I suppose I must hunt down each of them." Selene said, getting to her feet.

"What?" Anita asked. She looked shocked, hurt, and angry. "You would just leave me here?"

"Yes." Selene said. "You're more than well enough to fend for yourself, and in any case, we need to stop these people from causing any more damage. I have no time to spare"

"You are insane!" Anita told her angrily. "You cannot hope to match whoever it is that is out there!"

"Don't be so selfish." Selene said airily, as she flipped her hair behind her head with her hand. "You would rather me stay here by your side and let the witch get away?"

"I never said that!" Anita snapped. "Do not put words in my mouth!"

"It certainly didn't seem that way to me." Selene said smoothly. "I'm sorry, but I can't let you stand in the way of the greater good."

"Wait!" Anita called, but it was too late. Selene was sauntering off into the woods, honing all her senses to try and find a sign of any of the remaining witches.

Anita watched her go, her anger giving way to bemusement. Each of the three stands of light were shooting off in different directions than the one Selene had headed off in. "The witch is the other way..."

...

Ciela was getting close. She could see the lights converging into one from where she was. It was just a little farther and she could...

She stopped in place. Although not of her own free will. Confused, she shifted about in place for a moment. It felt like she were caught in something. She tried lowering her arms, but they could not move either.

“Hggrh!”

She ripped herself back with force. The thing holding her broke into shreds as she stumbled, trying to get her bearings.

She raised her arm and stared at it. Something thin, white, and sticky was hanging off her. “What is this?” She asked quietly.

She looked closer at the spot where she had been stuck. It was hard to see, at first, but eventually she could make out a number nearly invisible series of threads that lined from one tree to the other. It was a web. She realized in horror. And she had very nearly been caught in it.

There was a very large spider around here somewhere. She just hoped she wouldn’t become its lunch.

She managed to break out of the web the first time, but that was only because of the God Hand. A normal person could never have broken out of it. Were there more of them around? Perhaps Anita had gotten caught in one... Marionetta was kind of vague about what was wrong with her, after all.

Ciela wished she could communicate with her somehow, but she had no way of letting her know that she wanted to speak with her. It was very possible that Anita managed to crawl her way out of whatever situation she was in. Especially since she was with someone.

Maybe she should just poke around here and see what there was to see.

She found a nearby stick and decided to perform an experiment with it. She picked it up and jabbed it at the web.

As she had thought, it would not budge unless she put real magic into it. Anyone would be stopped dead in their tracks if they ran

straight into it. She shifted her weight around on it a bit, but it was stuck firmly to the web. The caught side didn't even budge.

She was lucky she was powerful enough to destroy pretty much anything she came across. She did not fancy getting caught in that and waiting for whatever made it to come along.

She pushed hard and the stick itself snapped. She looked at it, surprised, and then back at the web. She was unwilling to touch it again. Getting caught was not in her game plan.

She brandished the now much shorter stick in her hand and brought it down in front of her, slamming it into the web. It resisted, and greatly, but it gave eventually. And then the next, the one after, and the rest of the strands of the web followed.

She was sweating by the time it fell apart in front of her. She had put an awful lot of energy into breaking apart that one web. It was incredibly resilient, even to her magic.

"I better not caught in one of those again."

She found another stick and held it out in front of her, like a spear, and slowly walked forward, probing the area in front of where she was walking for webs. She did not find anything, which honestly only made her more paranoid. If there was one, surely there was more.

"Hello?" she called out to the silent forest. "Is anyone there?"

She strained her ears, trying to see if she could make out any sign of struggling or cries for help, but she heard nothing. Well, perhaps she was overthinking the situation. The Colony was swarmed with monsters, after all. Obviously, some of them would leave some sign that they were there. If she were lucky, maybe it had killed and eaten a Black Sun Witch.

She stepped forward carefully, her stick held out in front her."

"Salutations."

The calm, relaxed voice took her completely by surprise. She swung the stick around as if it were a sword.

The woman next to her leaned to the side, letting blow pass harmlessly past her head. Her hat draped over her eyes as she walked away her, towards the trees. Ciela turned around to face her, a little baffled. "I'm sorry." Ciela said quickly. "I thought you might have been a witch."

The woman laughed. It was a regal, sophisticated laugh. "What a notion." She said. "What a fantastic imagination."

The woman was dressed in a deep black dress with gorgeous frills and skirts. Her skin, or what little of it she could see, was a pasty, almost unhealthy looking white. A large brimmed hat covered her eyes, with a black veil that covered her face, obscuring most of it from view.

"However..."

She raised her hand forward, palms up, and then bent each of her fingers backward, one after the other. Each nail was long and blood red. "Not an unfounded one."

Ciela stared her down, unwilling to let herself be intimidated. "So who are you?" She asked. She tried to size up her surroundings. Getting caught in a web would almost certainly get her killed. She shifted her position so that her back was facing the area which she had come.

The woman tilted her head upward. Her bright white smile was wide and sinister. "I am the Black Widow... Charlotte." She said. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

She gave a small curtsy, her head bowed. Charlotte... Ciela thought, realization dawning on her. Charlotte was infamous for her cruelty and violence. She had murdered her husband and child to become a witch, and took great glee feasting on human kind. Her cruelty was known throughout the world.

"You have knowledge of me, I see." Charlotte commented. "You are already preparing to strike me down." She let out another sophisticated laugh. "Oh, my child." She said. "You have no idea- "

Ciela leapt forward so quickly she had not even had time to blink. Her hand came down against Charlotte's face, in a powerful slap.

Charlotte went whirling through the air her dress flailing, as Ciela jumped forward, jumping off the side of the trees for momentum as she desperately tried to catch up to her. "Take this!"

She dropped down on Charlotte and let out a mighty kick to her stomach. Charlotte slammed into the ground, scattering up dust as Ciela flipped above her, landing on her feet as she hit the ground. "What was that about me not being any match for you?" Ciela asked, scoffing, as she bounced on her heels, trying to warm herself up. "I think you vastly underestimated me."

She narrowed her eyes. The dust was taking a lot of time to clear up. Almost unnaturally so.

She heard a heel step into the ground in front of her.

"Surprising." Charlotte commented, as she stepped from the cloud. Her hand was gripped tightly around her hat. She looked completely unharmed. "Not many could hope to land a hand on me."

She lowered her hat, and for the first time Ciela saw her eyes. Large, black orbs divided into hundreds of little sections. It was disturbing sight. Her mouth had a bit of an odd curve to it, like her mouth was hiding something more than just teeth.

"The man I fought early today did not any require effort on my part at all." Charlotte claimed, as she tossed her hat aside. "Forgive me... I have severely underestimated you."

Her hair was long and spindly. Eight long, tail like strands poked out from her head.

"I thought you just another citizen of this poor place." Charlotte said quietly. "I did not take you entirely seriously."

She stepped back. Ciela, confused, was not quite sure what she was doing, until she happened to look down at her legs. She was

carefully removing one black shoe after the other and setting them aside.

And then her legs split in two, and then four. Where her ordinary, human looking legs had once been were now long, eight thin, but powerful looking pointed appendages. Her upper body towered over her now, and she looked down at Ciela with a predatory look in her eyes.

"But that changes now, warrior." Charlotte said, her voice suddenly gleeful. "You will die by my hand!"

Ciela rose her hand and pointed her finger straight at her, her eyes narrowed. "There's no monster in this world I fear." She said. "You will have to do a lot more than that to overcome me."

Charlotte laughed. It was a gleeful, joyous sound. "Yes!" She said. "That's what we want to see! You... you are one of us!"

Ciela leapt up at her again, aiming squarely to knock her stupid face, the woman did not even blink. Her upper bent over unnaturally, in a way that caused her to look down directly on her from above. Ciela ended up shooting right past her. It whirled around with shocking speed and thwacked her in the back.

Crack!

Ciela went flying, crashing through tree branches and leaves until her momentum was finally broken by a particularly thick and strong tree branch. She bounced off it and came tumbling down to the forest floor below, where Charlotte was already waiting for her, her legs clicking menacingly.

Ciela looked down at her, grimacing. She would have to use magic to get out of this, she realized in horror.

"Ha!" Ciela waved her arms to the side and she suddenly shifted directions, shooting off slightly to the left. It did not deter Charlotte in the slightest. She merely dived down to grab her again, but Ciela managed to hit the ground before she could. She rolled along the

ground, trying desperately to regain her balance as Charlotte's shadow descended on her.

"Ha!"

She leapt back up and lashed out at Charlotte's face. She leaned back, laughing, and avoided the blow completely. The long spidery leg rose, and then just as suddenly brought itself down on her. Ciela grabbed it, squeezing it tightly, and then pulled at the leg.

Ciela did not realize the legs were sharp until it was too late. Her hands were cut open as soon as she grabbed hold of it, but she tried to not let that deter her. She rolled around, using all her power to drag the spider down to the ground

Charlotte let out a scream as she slammed into the ground. But the remainder of Charlotte's legs, all seven of them, lashed out at her. But Charlotte had struck blindly. Only two connected. A cut on her waist, and one impaled her leg completely. She screamed in agony as she let go, trying her scramble away, desperately trying to free the blade stuck in her leg.

But Charlotte had not been deterred at all. In fact, upper body twisted to look at her with a sinister grin. The other legs adjusted themselves, and all came down on her, one after the other.

She could not remove the one in her leg under these circumstances. She tried her best to ignore the pain as the legs lashed out, striking at her. She would have to use her magic to block each strike and then try to get away.

She held her arms out, focusing her magic in a protective shield around her as the bladed legs struck. She lacked the talent to make a true, all-encompassing shield, so all she could do was try and block each strike with her arms.

The first leg went for her chest. She swung her right arm upward, swatting it away. The second came for her knee. She couldn't reach that spot, instead swung her leg behind her, taking up a bizarre stretching position. The third, fourth, and fifth all lashed out at once,

striking across the side of her body. She cried in pain as more gashes opened, sending her blood spilling across the grass.

She couldn't die like this. No way!

She grabbed the next leg with both her hands and twisted it with all her might. It broke in two completely, giving off a loud snap.

Charlotte was still smirking at her as she threw the broken off limb at her face. She laughed, pulling away from her enough to give her a chance to scramble away.

"You are an amusing one!" Charlotte said. "Your magical skill is not at all impressive... almost amateurish. But I have never had such a thrilling hand to hand battle in all of my years."

A horrifying thought suddenly dawned on Ciela: During their entire exchange Charlotte had not unleashed a single spell.

"Do not take this the wrong way, child." Charlotte told her, her voice almost Motherly. "But I meant what I said when I told you before. You cannot possibly win this fight."

Ciela forced a laugh of her own as she staggered to her feet. Her knee was still in pain, but a little bit more time would fix it as good as new. "Is that what you think?" She snarled "Lots of people have told me that before."

"I can see now that you are more than worthy of being part of our New World." Charlotte said. She outstretched her hand, holding it out towards her. "Your refusal to concede even after being defeated shows just how strong you truly are."

Ciela snarled even more fiercely and shouted up at her. "Shut up! I'm not going to lose!" Charlotte's smile widened.

"My child, you already have..."

Ciela tried to step forward, intent on ripping each one of those legs out of their sockets, only to find that she could not move. She looked down, awed, as something crawled up her leg, restraining her.

“Ha!” She lurched, breaking out of whatever it was, sending pieces of it flying everywhere.

But when she looked up, Charlotte was right there in front of her, her hands outstretched. She opened her mouth and a long, gigantic pair of pincers burst out. A thick, white substance shot from her mouth and onto her.

Ciela cried as she stepped back, tripping over herself as she tried to get the fluid off her. But after a couple of seconds it stiffened completely, attaching her arms and legs together in a thick, gooey mess that made it impossible to move.

She struggled in vain. She could not budge her arms in the slightest. Without even a little bit of motion from a limb, she could not unleash the God Hand.

Her struggling caused her limp, statue like frame to fall over onto her side. She winced in pain as her bent elbow slammed into the ground, propping her up. It was a very uncomfortable position to be in. She could hardly move anything at all. In fact, it was hard to even breathe.

“A fantastic fight.” Charlotte said. Her form was shifting again, back to the ordinary looking human form as she stepped closer to her. Her hat and shoes, previously discarded, floated over to her and she donned them both. In less than a minute, she appeared just as she had when Ciela had first seen her. “But not nearly enough, I’m afraid.”

Ciela could only glare at her, and she could only do that by shifting her eyes to the side.

“This power of yours...” Charlotte went on. “Has me really curious, I must say. Perhaps we could have some tea after all is said and done and talk about it.”

Ciela growled at her. She could do little else. She couldn’t even move her jaw.

"Pity." Charlotte said. "Perhaps you will change your tune once the summon is over and done with."

A branch cracked, some distance away. "Hello?" A voice called. It sounded nervous and uneasy. "Is someone there?"

"Excuse me." Charlotte said politely. Ciela was jerked into the air by something unseen and into the trees above.

She swung back and forth among the branches, unable to move or even cry out. Her eyes darted upward, towards where her feet should have been. The white fluid had spread all over her, encasing her in a thick material surrounding her entire body, and she was hanging by a strand of it.

There had to be something she could move, even a tiny little bit. Her face, leg, anything. But no matter how hard she pulled, she could not budge.

She was helpless in this position.

She cast her eyes back downward and watched as Charlotte slowly walked out of sight, deeper into the trees. Maybe she would forget she was here entirely. Ciela thought bitterly. And just leave her here to rot.

"Hello?"

Selene's voice was very soft and demure, a very different sort of voice than the one she normally used. "Is anyone out there?" She called again. "I'm... I'm scared."

She was being watched. The creature, the one pretending to be a woman, was standing near some trees, a hat tipped over her face.

"Hello?"

Selene stumbled onto the ground, catching herself mid fall. "Ngh." She muttered, as she stood back up and brushed herself off. "I can't see a thing..."

She tilted her head around the area, as if intently looking around at her surroundings. "If anyone is there, please...."

Charlotte stepped forward.

"Oh, thank you!" Selene said, spreading her arms wide as she quickly walked to her. "Thank goodness..."

Charlotte raised her hand, and a powerful magical strike cut the air between them. A deep gash appeared in the ground between them.

"Step any closer and you will die." Charlotte said quietly. Selene stopped, and gave a surprised gasp.

"What in the world-"

Charlotte glowered at her.

"You are no human." The witch said. "What are you? Speak truly?"

"Not human?" Selene squeaked. "What do you-"

Charlotte rose her hand again and struck again, this time as an actual attack. Selene knew she had been found out. She dropped her pretenses and slid out of the way, her lips peeled back in a fiendish smile. She arched her back and bared her teeth at her enemy.

She hissed, like an animal.

"I thought as much." Charlotte said, lowering her hand. "I could sense something unnatural..."

"Unnatural?" Selene rasped, as her arms fell to a hanging position. Her hair fell across her face, twisting and writhing. She thirsted for blood.

"Yes." Charlotte said. "You underestimated me, creature." She raised her finger. "Did you really think you, a mere mortal, could trick the Black Widow's chosen warrior? The very thought is laughable."

"I already killed your friend, Lumiose Monoa." Selene rasped, laughing a little. "You would be wise to not underestimate me..."

Charlotte smiled and shook her head. "Is that so?" She asked.

"Monoa was never very bright... she must have treated you like any other creature. How fitting... she left the depths of the sea to do

battle with the Earth and its creatures, and instead finds herself slain by one of its strongest fighters."

"One of its strongest?" Selene repeated. "I have no equal."

"Is that so?" Charlotte asked. "Very well, then."

She removed her hat, tossing it aside as she looked at Selene with little more than genuine curiosity. "You need little more than strength to survive in this world." She said. "If you have killed Moana, as you say, you are certainly worthy of being part of the New World. Please consider that fact, before we begin."

"The World, governments, people..." Selene smiled. "None of it make any difference to me. I live for myself, and will die for myself. I fight because that is what do, not for any sense of purpose. Fighting and killing is my calling."

"That is not a no." Charlotte said, removing her shoes, throwing them to the side. "The New World... our world, will be one that you will enjoy most vigorously."

"The creature you are summoning..." Selene said. "I'll kill it too."

"The folly of youth..."

Her legs were not legs. Or at least not human legs. They split apart and became something entirely different, and yet there were so many of them...

Selene hissed, her mouth widening to show off her teeth. "You will regret doubting me, Witch." She snapped. "I will eat you alive!"

"I have no doubt you will try." Charlotte said quietly. "But one cannot devour something larger than itself."

Selene did not answer: Her head was bent over.

Selene quickly stepped out of the way as the legs slashed at her. They doubled as blades. She realized almost immediately. Assuming she needed two to stand, that would mean she had six deadly weapons at her disposal.

But for whatever reason, she was only swinging one at her at a time. Selene stepped back as each slash struck at her, narrowly dodging each one by shifting from side to side.

The next attack led her to take the offensive. She dodged the attack, and her hair crawled along the beast's leg, binding it tightly. Charlotte gave a surprised sounding moan of pain as the it tugged, trying to find some sort of weakness.

The next attacks followed as usual, but after a couple more close calls Charlotte decided it would be a much better to attack the hair itself and lashed out at that instead.

It cut straight through, sending the strands of hair flying. Unbothered, Selene stepped backward, running a hand through her hair to check the damage. The strands were already growing back, and would be back to their full length in another few moments.

The hair that had been severed, however, did not stop attacking, even though it had been severed. The strand that had been wrapped around the leg only tightened further, it could do little else, from that position, but at least it was uncomfortable.

Selene suddenly recalled something that Tomoko had said to her once. She smiled to herself, giggled, and twirled.

"Some girls say they have bad hair days. I have a bad hair life!"

Was that how it went? Her opponent certainly wasn't laughing. She didn't even crack a smile. Maybe Tomoko wasn't as funny as she thought she was. Or maybe Charlotte just didn't get it.

"Anyway." Selene said, flipping her hair back in front of her face. "I would not do that again if I were you... If that had happened to be around your neck, you wouldn't be here now."

Charlotte blasted the hair away with a force of magic, and it fell to the ground, lifeless. "An interesting skill." She said. "But not one that could kill."

"You would be surprised." Selene said. "I ripped your friend Monoa's head off with it."

Her wave began to writhe on her head, as if it was made of snakes. "Oh, look. You've made it angry..."

"What exactly are you?" Charlotte asked. Her eyes seemed to bug out of their sockets as they focused on her. "There is no magic at work here..."

"I have no need for it." Selene said, as the hair extended towards her foe, reaching again. The blade slashed again, but this time the strands avoided the blow by splitting apart into two large strands, which quickly crawled up the leg in a tight grip.

Charlotte fired off another burst of magical energy, but this time it did nothing. The hair tightened more thickly, and Selene jolted her head downward, ripping the leg right out of its socket.

Charlotte roared with pain as her blood, colored a deep dark black, splattered everywhere. Selene reared back, her hair retracting back into her scalp as she relished the sensation of having been the first to draw blood. The leg lay useless in between them.

"Do you see now?" Selene asked. "You are nothing to me."

Charlotte stared down at her. For a long moment, she did not move or speak. "It is certainly difficult to even lay a hand on me." She said slowly. "My congratulations to you. But it will take a lot more than that to even scratch me."

"Scratch you?" Selene repeated. "I just ripped off your leg."

Before she had even finished speaking, another leg burst out of the wound and flexed, dripping bodily fluids all over the ground. It touched the ground with a mighty thud. It seemed perfectly healthy, like she had never damaged it to begin with.

"Nice trick." Selene commented. "But it doesn't change the fact that I can do it again. And again. And again."

"You put too much faith in your own skill." Charlotte said, her pincers clicking together threateningly. "You are not going to walk away from this fight the victor, I assure you."

"You are all talk." Selene scoffed, as she stepped forward, closer to Charlotte. "A real warrior would have crushed me by now. Yet none of your attacks have even touched me."

"Are you sure about that?"

She stopped. "What?"

"Both of your arms, your right knee, your face..."

She raised her hand to her cheek, and ran a finger down it. She found a small, shallow cut. So small, and so inconsequential that she had not even noticed it. Impossible. "How...?"

Charlotte gave her a smile. "That is my little secret, child." She said. "Weakened as I am, I cannot unleash the full extent of my power. But I still could easily kill you any time I wish."

Selene prided herself on her ability to see people for what they really were. Charlotte was not lying. She really did think she could kill her.

Selene laughed darkly. Words were beyond her at this point. She could feel her hands starting to shift into a set of vicious claws. Her face elongated as her teeth grew, becoming razor sharp. The slits under the arms of her dress opened to reveal her dark black wings, which spread wide on either side of her. Large furry ears poked out from under her hair, knocked aside her mask and sending it clattering to the ground.

"I see you have stopped playing around." Charlotte said. "A transformation of your own... how interesting."

Selene let out a high-pitched shriek, as she bent over, landing on all fours, her back hunched over. Her claws dug into the dirt as she lowered her head to the ground, her teeth bared. The change in her physical appearance was monstrous.

Selene leapt forward, her powerful legs springing up toward Charlotte, her arms outstretched.

Charlotte's legs folded in front of her, crisscrossing each other to form a shield, and Selene ran straight into it. She grabbed onto the legs with one arm as she tried to claw at Charlotte's face with the other, reaching out in between the blades as far as she could reach.

Charlotte twisted her legs forward, sending her flying away. Selene growled as she flipped around, landing on a tree. Her claws dug into the bark as she scrambled alongside it, shredding bark as she went.

"Pitiful." Charlotte said, as she swung her sword in front of her, almost lazily horizontally.

The tree suddenly began to shudder beneath her, and began to topple over. Selene jumped as the tree fell over with a loud crack. She landed on the next tree, her mind racing on what she should do next.

But Charlotte was there, swinging her swords on the branches above. Selene pressed her head against the tree as the sword sailed overhead, and then let herself slide downward, further away from her.

But Charlotte crawled down over to her, her own spidery legs clicking against the wood of the tree to pursue her prey.

Selene pulled her ears back, hissing as she launched herself back up towards her, going for another powerful strike. Charlotte easily avoided it, and this time, her counterattack struck true.

The sword ripped through Selene's flesh and she let out a bloodcurdling scream as her blood spurted out of her chest. Charlotte gave a wicked smile as the blood splashed all over her face.

Selene plummeted to the ground, completely unmoving.

Charlotte screamed.

A searing, burning pain erupted all over her face. She raised her hands towards it and found, to her horror, that the flesh had almost entirely been eaten away.

Below her, Selene flipped back over, completely unharmed, and scrambled back up the tree. This time, Charlotte was not prepared for her claws. She raked them all over her body, stabbing and cutting at her.

Selene mauled her, completely and utterly. Her toe claws dug into the side of the tree as she slashed and hacked away at Charlotte's limp body, shredding it into pieces.

Her last strike passed right through her. At first she had thought she had severed her in half, but then she began to realize that there was no blood. And the body was... vanishing.

"Salutations!"

Powerful, spidery legs wrapped around her neck from behind and restrained her, binding each of her limbs behind her. Selene snarled, whipping her head around completely to snap at her with her teeth, but Charlotte was too far away.

The legs ripped her off the side of the tree, and with a cry, they fell to the ground, and once again Selene slammed to the ground. This time, however, she was not playing dead. She lay on the ground, unmoving.

Charlotte looked down at her, breathing a little hard. "Well." She said, after somewhat catching her breath. "I didn't think your blood would be acidic. Poisonous, I was expecting, but to melt my face like that..."

She tilted her head to the side and felt her cheek. The burn mark where the acid had first touched her was still there. "My healing powers are quite considerable." Charlotte said. "But even I cannot do anything with this. Your blood greatly interests me. Perhaps you could be of use in the new world."

Selene did not even twitch. She had completely passed out. Charlotte slowly morphed back into her more humanoid form, her hat and shoes returning to her just as they had last time. "There are incredibly gifted warriors here." She commented. "To think I would be pushed like by a couple of children..."

She giggled, placing a hand over her mouth. "Or perhaps the summoning has exhausted me much more than I have imagined." She said. "I will be glad to retire once all is said and done, and the rain of fire burns away this world..."

Charlotte shook her head, smiling, as she looked down at her. "Your strength is admirable." She said. "Your wounds are not life threatening... I can tell. When you awake, the world will be a very different place, where the strong will not be shackled by the weak."

"Giving her the speech, Charlotte?"

Charlotte's smile turned to a frown. "Calanthe." She said. "If you don't leave now, your blood will be offered to the Great One."

And, of course, Calanthe was right there next to her, laughing. "Don't be like that, Charlotte." She said. "That was a great fight!"

"You were watching us?" Charlotte asked, her voice sour.

"Of course." Calanthe replied. To add insult to injury, she wrapped her arm affectionately around her. "Or, rather, I was watching her. Girl was following me around for a while there. I was interested in learning more about her."

Her arm was suddenly leaning into thin air. Calanthe frowned slightly as Charlotte appeared again right in front of her, looking down on Selene. "And you could not confront her yourself?" She sounded irritable. "Both of my opponents tonight put up quite the fight."

"Did they?" She smiled sinisterly. "They gave me no trouble."

Charlotte did not respond. She merely stared at Selene's face, considering how to respond. "They are strong." She said at last. "It is the weak I prey on."

Calanthe smiled widely, nodding her head in agreement. "Same, same." She said. "They're the people we need around." She tapped her cheek, thoughtfully. "I wonder if they have any brothers?" She asked. "There's some good blood there."

Charlotte scowled, but then suddenly had an idea of how to be rid of her.

"There was a man."

Calanthe looked towards her, suddenly interested. "R-really?" Her ears twitched as she reached up, brushing through her hair. "Uh, you didn't...?"

"I left him in a web." She said. "Not seriously hurt."

To her annoyance, Calanthe had wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. "Wow, thank you so much!"

"Yes, yes, I'm the best." Charlotte said dryly. "He's that way. And you best hurry."

Calanthe nodded enthusiastically. And promptly disappeared.

She wished it was always that easy to get rid of her. But maybe, with the dawn of the New World, that would change.

She looked down at Selene and lowered her hat. And a web spun out of her mouth, covering her completely. Selene's face had reverted to her human form. She looked very peaceful and beautiful. You would never have known that she had just been the loser in such a savage fight, Charlotte thought. Who was this girl?

Her eyes fell on the mask, taking in all the little details of its intricate design. "Just what are you?"

Lost in thoughts, she stared intently at her face for a few moments. From this angle, she looked perfectly ordinary... besides her otherworldly beauty, at any rate.

Something behind her cracked.

She whirled around, her eyes panning around the area looking for the source of the sound. She had lost herself completely for a moment there. She had forgotten entirely that as long as she was helping keep up the barrier, that she was a target.

"Come closer..." She said quietly, taking in all the sights of the forest. "Come to me..." There was nothing there.

Charlotte stepped forward, her hat drawn across her eyes, intently looking around at the dark trees. There was nothing on the ground...

She looked up. There, she saw a figure scrambling up the side of tree, to where the first girl was hanging. There was someone climbing a tree near her, trying to get closer...

"Salutations." Charlotte said, looking up at the girl inquisitively.

The figure looked down. It was a girl, dressed in a little white dress and sun hat, complete with sandals and pure white gloves.

"Oh my..."

Charlotte smiled. The girl had clearly caught sight of her and was stricken with fear.

"I'm awfully high up!"

She had not noticed her at all, somehow, and had only looked down by pure coincidence. She readjusted herself among the branches as she looked back up at the girl hanging in the web.

"Don't worry, Ciela!" She shouted up at her. "I'll... I'll get you down!"

She raised her hand and the web suddenly jolted. The prisoner screamed in pain.

"I'm sorry!" The girl wailed. "I'm so- "

"Are you lost, child?" Charlotte asked, raising her voice this time.

Marionetta didn't even turn around. She let out a shriek and tumbled: falling out of the tree to the ground below. Charlotte looked down at her, scrambling to get up, hardly daring to believe it. A girl like this, in her woods? Preposterous.

Marionetta scrambled to her feet. Her knees had taken a bad scrape as she had fell. How high was that? She thought faintly, her heart still racing. Twenty feet? She was lucky to be alive....

But there had been something behind her... something sinister.

"Are you lost, child?"

She jumped again, turning herself around to face the woman in question. That face was pale and ghastly, but it was smiling at her. A small smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"Oh...." Marionetta tried to compose herself. "Uh, no..."

She froze, unable to get any words out. Charlotte reached out a hand and touched her face, stroking it. "Do not be afraid." She said softly, as she traced her hand up and down the side of her face. "I am not to be feared."

Marionetta did not move, but she was not looking at her face. Instead, her eyes were cast downward. "Look at me, child."

Charlotte commanded, her voice sharpening. "Tell me... what has brought you here?"

She did not respond. Charlotte's hand stopped moving, laying gently against Marionetta's face. "Do I frighten you?"

"Y-yes." Marionetta said. "Um, could you stop... touching me, please?"

Charlotte smiled, but did not do so. Marionetta was very uncomfortable now. "Um, who exactly... are you?" She asked. "Are you are a- a witch?"

"I am not a witch, child." Charlotte said, her voice still soft and quiet. The wind blew roughly then, causing their dresses to billow.

"Please... you must come with me. It is not safe here."

A black portal formed and Charlotte slowly slid her arm down Marionetta's side, grabbing her hand. She pulled away, her eyes wide. "No!" She said sharply. "My friend... my friend is up there, in the web! You must help us."

"Help...?" Charlotte repeated. "What are you saying? Is someone in danger?"

"Yes!" Marionetta said, nodding furiously. "Ciela was fighting some giant... ugly spider woman and ended up getting caught in her web."

"Did she, now...?" Charlotte asked. "Your friend has almost certainly perished. Please, you must come with me."

"No!" Marionetta said quickly. "I know she's up there... there, can you see it!"

She turned around and pointed straight up at the webbing that was wrapped around Ciela. It shook a little. The girl above was still struggling, how cute.

"Why, you're right." Charlotte said, feigning amazement. "Here, perhaps I can help..."

"Oh, thank you!" Marionetta said quickly. "Yes, she's being held up by some sort of- "

"I know perfectly well what it is." Charlotte said quietly. "I will take care of it. But please, get yourself to safety."

"No, Marionetta, do not trust her!"

Marionetta stiffened. And then took several steps back.

Charlotte looked at her intently. "Well?" She asked. "What is the matter...?"

"Just who are you?" She asked again, this time much more accusatorily. "I've never seen you before."

"I am from the capital city of Cereza." She said. "I am here to fight the evil Black Sun. My name is Charlotte..."

"Charlotte?"

She backed away even more now, suddenly very afraid.

"If thou art willing, we shall depart." Charlotte said, raising herself to her full height, her arms outstretched. "Unless... you are not willing?"

Marionetta shook her head frantically.

"Pity." Charlotte said. She raised her hand and bent her finger.

Marionetta screamed as she was yanked toward her by some unseen force, her heels dragging into the ground. She struggled and pushed to try and get away, but to no avail. Charlotte was very close to her once more, close enough for her to again take hold of her hand and gently tug her to the portal.

"Get away from me!"

She imagined the string, the bond between herself and Ciela becoming something stronger. She pulled at her, as if she were a fish, trying to get her to come closer to her.

The webbing holding her up bent, but held true. She may not be able to pull Ciela to her, but maybe she could pull herself to Ciela.

"Ha!"

The sheer force of the pull sent her flying out of Charlotte's grip, soaring high above her and into the trees.

She slammed into the webbing, and initially was pleased with herself for making such a clever escape. But then she tried to move her hand, and realized that both sides of the cocoon were made of some kind of sticky substance. She was completely stuck and could not move an inch!

Charlotte lazily soared up off the ground and slowly floated towards her, her eyes never straying away from her. Marionetta struggled vainly, but she could hardly move a muscle. Ciela watched fearfully from inside the webbing.

Charlotte gently wrapped her arms around her, and peeled her off. Marionetta let out a cry as she struggled and fought, but Charlotte held on tightly to her. "Stupid girl." Charlotte said. "Would you like to fall?"

Mari felt that she would. She hardly even considered the height they were at. Charlotte's touch was oddly cold and clammy. It made her shiver. So she kept struggling until a surge of electricity surged through Charlotte's hand into her.

Marionetta gasped, her hair standing on end at the sudden shock.

"I could kill you right now, if you like." Charlotte said quietly. "There is nothing stopping me. I simply do not wish to."

Marionetta looked down at the ground, tears in her eyes. "Please." She whimpered. "Let her go... Let us both go!"

"I will not do that, child." Charlotte said softly, as they descended to the ground. "You are mine now..."

She dropped her, sending her tumbling to the ground. Marionetta scrambled, her heart racing, but Charlotte's foot pressed down into her back.

"I regret that I must sacrifice you to the Great One." Charlotte said slowly. "Our master demands tribute."

Master? Was she talking about the being she made her contract with? Marionetta racked her brains, trying to remember if Anita's training There had to be a way out of this mess. But she came up with nothing.

"S-sacrifice me?" Marionetta repeated, her voice shrill. "Wha-what do you mean?"

"Your blood."

Marionetta cried out in pain as something sharp entered back. She squirmed and struggled and fought as... whatever it was pierced through her back. She could hear a loud slurping noise, and she lay her head against the ground, hoping desperately it would end soon.

The slurping stopped. Marionetta's head felt light and she felt dizzy. She could make out a pair of long legs walked past her, stopping in front of her head. She raised it, and watched as what seemed to be blood spilled out in front of her, splashing her across the face and onto the ground below.

She cried out as steam rose up in front of her, causing her to cough. She reached her hand forward, trying to swipe the steam away, only to instead graze against Charlotte's leg. "Idiot girl."

Her leg stomped on her arm and Marionetta let out another cry of pain. It had broken, she realized in horror. "You are far too small." Charlotte said. "You had very little blood to give."

"I'm sorry!" She wailed, placing her face on the ground. "Please... please let me go."

Charlotte looked down at her, her eyes staring down at her with nothing but contempt. "You are a weak one." She said. "I wish I could be rid of you now, but..."

She raised her hand to her hat, and to Marionetta's horror, opened her mouth wide, revealing the vicious set of pincers. "You shall become our prisoner." She said. "You will be kept here, and allowed to recover. Then... then you can offer more tribute."

No... Marionetta thought. This couldn't be happening to her... Ciela... Ciela was not able to reach her. Rolf was nowhere near them, and Anita... Anita was still lying on her back, trying to recover from her battle against Rose Calanthe.

There was no one coming to her rescue. There was no one else out there who would even try. She clutched her hand into a fist. If only she were strong...

Ciela... what would she do?

Her powers...

She did not know the first thing about magic. She could not fly, punch people so hard they exploded, or make things move without touching them. All she had were the strings that tied her to her puppets.

Her powers...

She could not seize control of Charlotte. She was simply too powerful. Even Ciela had been able to break out of her control, and her magical skill was far below par. The few times she had tried to experiment with controlling Anita had led to her realizing immediately what she was trying to do. She simply could not easily take control of people with strong magical powers.

Her powers...

She remembered that, long ago, she had not been able to seize direct control of people's minds. Instead she had to control each limb for them to do what she wished.

"Marionetta."

Once again, she was standing in that massive house she longed to forget. But not in her room, where she was so often confined. Instead, she was in the kitchen, sitting neatly at the table, her feet hanging off the ground.

Her eyes were puffy red from crying. She could not quite remember why. But she remembered who had made her cry.

A knife slammed down into the table in front of her. She jumped. Crying was for babies. She was told. It was not fitting for such a big girl to cry.

She nodded vigorously, hoping that a sign of understanding would placate her attacker. But it was not so.

You never learned.

You never will will

You lied to me

Over

And over

Over again

No, no, that wasn't true. Marionetta said. I'll be a good girl this time, I promise! I won't do it again!

Liar!

Liar

Liar

Liar

Liar

Liar

Liar

Liar

She had been hit, she remembered faintly. And that blow had sparked something in her. A cruel desire to strike back. Somehow. Someway.

Before she had realized what she had done, her attacker was lying slumped against the table. The knife had penetrated through each cheek, and HER mouth was gushing blood...

Mari screamed, in shock, pain, horror, and joy, all at once.

“One touch is enough...”

She focused. Five strings attached themselves to different points of Charlotte’s leg. One string for each of her four fingers and her thumb. To her surprise, she found that the strings were placed on two different limbs. What in the world...? She could not understand it, but it seemed as if Charlotte’s leg was made up of several different limbs.

“What are you doing?” Charlotte asked sharply. She cast a look down at her leg. “You have some kind of magic after all...”

She erected a magical barrier in between them, but it did not matter. The strings were already lodged firmly inside of her. They could not be repelled at this stage.

Mari let out a breath of air, thinking deeply.

Ciela was above her, and Marionetta was connected to her as well. Through her, they formed a sort of triangle. She imagined a thick string forming between Ciela and Charlotte, binding them together as well.

How was that possible? Mari wondered. How was she doing this?

It didn’t matter, she realized. She had the vaguest plan now, and had to commit to it. It was time to pull both strings.

Charlotte let out a scream as her leg was torn apart by the strings. Her long, spidery limbs stuck out at their full length as Marionetta pulled with all her strength, from both angles. The strings connected directly to her came her way, but the ones connected to Ciela pulled at her legs as well, like a sort of pulley. The result was that Charlotte was dragged forward, closer to her, but with her legs pulled apart in a painful looking split.

The two free legs, the ones she had not connected to, raised themselves upwards and tried to cut at her. She ducked as the swipes came at her head, narrowly missing her skull and instead knocking away her hat. It tumbled to the ground at her feet, spinning.

The leg closest to Ciela ripped off entirely, flying off into the air towards her cocoon. It pierced through its bottom, running it completely through the top, its pointed edge slightly cutting into the web suspending it.

Charlotte fell to the ground in front of her, but she smoothly twirled, landing on her feet. She glared at Mari with an inhuman fury that made her blood run cold. She raised her hand and lightning shot from her fingertips, directly scorching Marionetta's clothes and skin.

Mari screamed in pain as she was electrocuted, her thoughts hazy and going dark. *"Ciela, Ciela, please answer..."*

She did not. Marionetta cried out again, screaming her name as invisible blades cut into her skin, drawing long bloody gashes all over her arms, stomach, and leg. She whimpered as she collapsed at Charlotte's feet. Charlotte stood over her, glaring down at her with a hateful eye.

"You..."

Mari looked up at Ciela's cocoon and shifted it around a bit. It moved back and forth, swinging from side to side, grazing against the blade. Ciela could do little else, Mari realized faintly.

The other legs, four of them, descended upon her in a flash. She screamed as each one pierced through her limbs. Both of her arms and legs were penetrated. They sliced through her like butter, pegging her to the ground.

She screamed in pain and agony as she was lifted, high, high above Charlotte's head. She could not feel any of her limbs now: She stared down at Charlotte's disheveled face, barely able to make out her sinister expression. She licked her lips as she looked up at her hungrily. "Oh, you cannot even begin to imagine the pain you will be going through." She purred.

Marionetta could not move, and therefore could not struggle. She simply hung there, above her, her head lowered. "Stop this..." Mari murmured. "You're... scaring me..."

“Is that how a warrior talks?”

But she wasn't a warrior... she wasn't a witch. She was just Marionetta. She just lived here. She wasn't strong enough to stand up to such a fearsome opponent, even after she had been exhausted from fighting the strongest person she knew. She wished Ciela were here, with her. She would think of something.

The string above snapped.

Charlotte looked upward, surprised, as the cocoon crashed down straight onto her face. She crumbled, its weight crushing her. The leg, still sticking out from the cocoon, popped out slightly from its position, bending at an odd angle.

The blades pulled out from Mari's body, and she fell to the ground, sobbing. She could not even push herself up off the ground, the pain was simply too great.

Was it over?

The cocoon went flying off, slamming into a nearby tree before bursting into pieces. Ciela, sprawled out, unmoving. Marionetta stared at her. Something was very wrong. Blood seeped out from her onto the grass below. She tried to connect with Ciela, but saw nothing. It was obvious what had happened.

She had accidentally stabbed Ciela.

Even more horrified and disgusted with herself, she buried her face in the grass. Charlotte stood over her, completely unharmed.

“It is over, child.” Charlotte said, her voice dangerous now. “You will be our next sacrifice.”

Marionetta could do little else but sob. A part of her didn't even register the words. She was simply in too much pain to think clearly.

“To think that such a weak girl could land so many hits...” Charlotte shook her head. “This spell has tired me more than I had thought.”

She looked down at her with disdain. “Of course, I can't simply kill you either.” She said. “Or you would have been long dead, regardless

of my condition.”

Marionetta flinched as a blade slammed into the ground by her face. Her heart was racing furiously. Steam was rising all around her. She coughed again, weakly as Charlotte sliced into her elbow, cutting into her. She winced in pain, whimpering as the blade tore into her skin and dress, spraying blood onto the ground. She whimpered again, unable to move at all as the pain overtook her. Charlotte stared at her, her eyes unwavering from her prey.

“You will suffer greatly before perishing in a rain of fire.” She said. “You will be nothing to the Great One, Umbra, even with your powers.

“Anita, please... she’s going to kill me!”

Anita was still lying still on her back. She had not moved at all during their entire fight. She lurched forward, despite all the pain, and tried to get to her feet. She stumbled, falling flat onto her face.

“Marionetta, I...”

She did not have the strength to come to her aid, she realized in horror. She was too wounded to even move, let alone come save her.

What else could she do? What more could she do? The thoughts raced through her mind as Charlotte raised the leg to her lips and slid it across her tongue, lapping up Marionetta’s own blood.

She closed her eyes, trying to think of anything... Something... she could do to her. She reached out a hand and slowly reached for Charlotte’s cloak. Maybe... more strings would...

The blade came down onto the back of hand, and she let out a cry. Charlotte outright laughed at the sight of the girl squirming under her, crying pitifully. “I’ve never seen an Umbra perform so poorly.” She said. “Do you have the slightest idea of how your powers even work?”

She twisted the blade deeper into her hand, and Marionetta sobbed even harder. She reached with her other hand, desperate to pry her

away, but more blades slowly pushed themselves towards her. She shied away, terrified.

What had Anita told her about improving her powers?

Live your life.

She couldn't do that under these circumstances, she thought miserably. There was nothing she could do. She could not apply more strings to her person. She was simply too weakened to even do that.

But did she need to connect with Charlotte directly? She remembered how she had connected with the fish people at a considerable distance to form a makeshift net. Her eyes fell on the tree to Charlotte's right.

She raised her finger, and a beam of energy shot out from it. Charlotte's eyes narrowed, and a barrier formed in between them, glinting with a white light. But she had not been what Marionetta was aiming for.

"Even your aim is pitiful." Charlotte told her, as Marionetta curled her hand into a fist. She imagined the string around Ciela, to her left, and the string connected to the tree, were one. The center of the string ran through her closed fist.

Tangible... I can make it a tangible object.

She imagined a powerful slingshot, bursting out with lethal force. She released her fist. The string sprung forward, taking on a bright blue glow as it materialized in mid motion. Charlotte's eyes widened as the string smacked her directly on the throat. It could not be simply deflected, and the force and power of the shot sent her flying. She soared up, up, up, into a tree above.

Did I get her? Marionetta thought faintly, hardly daring to believe it. She had not.

Charlotte let out an inhuman screech as she whirled around in midair, around several tree branches, and soared back over to her.

Another... Another...

She fired off two more shots, connecting two trees on either side of Charlotte. And then, when she flew in between them... she made that string tangible.

She jolted in midair, eyes wide, as the rope slammed straight into her throat, clotheslining her. She flipped in midair, her momentum carrying her forward, downward...

The leg.

She cast a look down at the blade she had ripped out, some time ago. She still had a connection with it. And without thinking about it, she swung her arm upward. She cried in pain, as the cuts in her arm were deep, but the leg still jolted upward.

It slashed upward, right as Charlotte passed over it, and sliced right through her stomach. One woman became half, and her upper body slammed into the grass in front of her, while her legs landed some distance away.

Marionetta could not look at her body. Exhaustion had overtaken her, and she lowered her head into the grass, too exhausted to even cry. She was still in great pain, agonizing pain even. She felt no joy over having to kill someone, even a witch as powerful and cruel as Charlotte. She was in deep pain, and Ciela...

Ciela?

She raised her head, turning it towards her, and saw that Ciela's body was still lying across the tree. She had not moved. Panic overtook her. What was wrong with her? What... if...

She tried to crawl forward, towards her, but quickly realized that she had lost all use of her left hand. In all the panic of her fight, she had not even noticed. She had to adjust herself, painfully, into focusing on her right side. Each inch forward caused a lot of pain, and she felt that the deep scratch on her shoulder had touched some sort of nerve or muscle which made it difficult to move, but she could not let Ciela sit alone. She could not! She would not!

The pain was absolutely agonizing, but several minutes of toiling later got her to her side, and she reached out a bloody hand to touch her face. "Ciela..." She said quietly. She looked awfully pale, and cold...

Her hand trembled, and she set her down. Her eyes fell across her side, and found the stab wound in her side. The leg had gone through her side. It looked nasty... Incredibly so. There was no way... no way anyone could survive that.

Her breath hitched. She let out another sob. Ciela... Ciela.... Ciela... how could this have happened? She thought faintly. How could she have...?

Anita could heal wounds. She realized, just as quickly. Yes, yes. If Anita could come here, she may be able to save her. *Anita... Anita...!*
"Huh?"

Anita tried getting up, but once again failed. "*Marionetta?*" She asked. "*What's wrong? What's going on?*"

Marionetta opened her eyes and stared at Ciela, sending the image directly towards her. Anita froze, hardly daring to believe it, before responding. "*What happened?*"

"*She's hurt! You need to get here now!*"

"*I... will.*" She said. She floated off the ground, trying in vain to get take off, only to falter, slamming into the ground. "No!" She cursed, "*Marionetta, you're going to have to do it.*"

"*Wha-what?*" She asked, horrified. "*But I don't know the first thing about-* "

"I know." Anita said hurriedly. "But you are going to have to keep her alive until I can get there myself. You HAVE to do this. If you do not, she will die."

She did not know what to do or say. She felt that she had to protest, but considering the circumstances... she had no choice.

"*I... okay.*" She said. "*I... will save her.*"

She cast a look at her own injured hand and flinched. She couldn't even heal her own wounds; how would she save Ciela under these circumstances?

"Do not worry, I will walk you through it." Anita promised. *"I will be right here, with you."*

If that was true, you would be able to do it yourself. Marionetta thought bitterly, as she forced herself to look at the wound.

"It looks worse than it is." Anita told her. *"She would already have been killed if it had been a lethal strike. You simply grazed her. The main thing you will have to focus on is stopping the bleeding."*

"Won't it do that on its own?"

"NO." Anita replied firmly. *"You idiot, leave it alone and she will die for sure."*

"O-okay..."

"Do not worry." Anita said. *"All you must do is close the wound."*

"Close it?"

"Yes." Anita said. *"A simple skill. It will be trivial for you, I am sure."*

Marionetta stared at the wound, unsure of how to tell her that she had no idea what she was supposed to be doing. "Close it..."

"Yes, it is very simple." Anita said. *"Do not hesitate, just do it already."*

She looked hopelessly at the wound. She did not even know how to begin, and the pain all over her own body was making it difficult to even think too hard about the issue. She needed to focus, she knew. She needed to do something... anything, to save her.

She tried to ignore the searing pain in her left hand and poked and probed at the wound with her finger. She remembered how Anita had healed wounds. A magical energy radiated from her and healed wounds. She had made it look so easy. Was it as easy as she said it was?

She took in a deep breath and tried to find the magic within her. It wasn't hard... she used it pretty much every day, but almost exclusively in association with her Umbra powers. Exerting it the normal way was beyond her, and she struggled for several moments on how to begin.

She breathed out, trying to exert the power all around her hand instead of just in the fingers, as she typically did. But instead of the bright blue glow that Anita used, it was a white one that seemed a bit less... lively. It seemed to just sort of sit there, in her hand, without the flowing feeling that Anita's had given off.

"No, no no no no." Anita said. "Those are your Umbran powers manifesting themselves. You will need to dig into more natural energy."

"But I- "

"If your powers could fix her wounds, you would have done so already." Anita said. "You need to find your natural energy and unleash it."

Was that true? Marionetta thought, as she looked down at Ciela doubtfully. Were her powers useless in this situation?

"What if... I use my powers to stop the bleeding..."

"What?"

She didn't think it was impossible. She remembered how she had bound the River King in the makeshift net. Maybe this time, she could do so again on a much smaller scale.

She raised her hand to the wound and traced each of her fingers across it, from side to side. Each String became tangible as she did, repeatedly, until a number of them crossed over the wound. Several of them, in fact.

She frowned, pulling away. She had been trying to make her own, makeshift, giant bandage, but she was simply not able to create

enough strings to block off the blood flow. She had trouble arranging them tightly enough to be practical.

"You know, that could work." Anita said thoughtfully. *"Marionetta, perhaps... you could use your strings to pull the skin together."*

"I'm sorry?"

"Your strings can reach as far as they need to, right? Does that not mean they can shrink, as well?"

Marionetta looked down, at her hands, considering the possibility. She clenched her fingers together, and the strings did shrink.

Ciela moaned in pain.

"Careful." Anita warned her. *"You are not healing the damage; you need to consider how best to close the wound."*

Marionetta nodded, steeling itself. She had pulled very hard when shrinking the strings, she recalled. So perhaps if she did so much more slowly, it would cause her less pain.

It sort of worked. Ciela stilled shifted uncomfortably below her as the skin slowly pulled over itself.

"It will not stay like that." Anita warned her. *"Any ideas?"*

Now that she had come so far... she had.

"I think I could just sort of... tie it together. Like a... shoelace."

She did not wait for Anita's approval. She pushed herself to figure out how it worked. She experimented a bit with her shoelace idea, but she realized quickly that it was impossible... the string would disappear completely if broken off her finger.

But perhaps another pattern? One that wouldn't require two strings to fold over one another? Like a... "

She adjusted the strings, playing around with them a little before deciding a single one would do. She started at one end of the wound and, in a zig zag motion, crisscrossed across it with a single string.

She watched intently as the wound pulled itself shut, closing the wound almost completely.

She stared at it, unable to wrap her head around what she had just done. "W-wow..."

"That looks great, Marionetta." Anita told her. *"I will have to clean the wound properly when I get there, but that should..."*

Marionetta collapsed completely onto the ground, completely exhausted. She could not even keep her eyes open, she had exhausted herself so much.

"Marionetta?" Anita asked curiously. "What just..."

"Tired..."

She was more than just tired. Anita thought in horror. She was exhausted... all of her stunts today had completely worn her out.

"I will be there as soon as I can." Anita promised. *"Please, relax..."*

She did not respond. She had already passed out.

Anita turned her head, staring at the force field in front of her. The second beam of light had faded, only leaving two behind.

She spent several more minutes staring at it. She could tell the barrier had been weakened. But it was still being fueled by two separate, distinct lights.

Each witch was sending a barrier back to this spot. Why? To what purpose? Summoning didn't require any kind of barriers. The best guess she could come up with was that whoever was heading the summoning did not want to be interrupted by anything.

Anita thought about the problem for several more minutes. There were two witches remaining. Frideswide the Giant, and Rose Calanthe. She had been absolutely demolished by Calanthe, admittedly, but perhaps if she played her cards right she could overcome the Giant.

Or, at least, she imagined she could if she was not injured and on the verge of death. At least she was recovering.

But she could not wait any longer.

She sat up, wincing in pain, as she finally staggered to her feet. Every bit of her was sore and aching. She almost collapsed again, but managed to stand tall after a brief struggle.

Good. She thought warily, as she took her first step forward. It would only get easier from here.

She stumbled several times on the way, but she at least she had reached the point where she could move. They weren't far. She thought. But moving like this meant it would take forever to reach them.

Anita tried focusing on the parts that ached the most with each passing step, trying her best to heal the damage. It was much harder to heal your own wounds. If she had been tending someone else with the same injuries, they would have been long since healed.

It took her several minutes to even reach the trees, and even longer to find where the others even were. She staggered around for a bit in circles, looking everywhere, but to no avail.

"Hello?" She called out again. "Is anyone there?"

She heard a muffled, shuffling sound some distance away. Her mind raced with the possibilities.

"Help... me..."

It was not a voice she recognized. She supposed it must be the third girl. She was reluctant to abandon her search for Marionetta and Ciela, of course, but she could not bear the thought of leaving someone on their own.

"Hello?" She asked, poking around in the bushes. "Where are you?"

"Over... here..."

The voice was soft and faint, and still quite far away. Anita peered around the bushes and through the trees, trying to spot where the voice was coming from. She stepped forward, shifting her eyes every which way to try and find out where the voice was coming from...

"Here.... Here..."

She looked up. And cried out as a black creature with a wide grinning mouth descended on her.

She stepped back, ignoring the pain, and unleashed a powerful magical attack, knocking the beast outside. It let out an incredibly human sounding screamed as it slammed into a young sapling, snapping it in half.

The beast shuddered, shaking off its black coat as it stared at her intently. "I hunger." It said. Its tail twitched back and forth, but it did not move.

Now that she had a better look at it, Anita could now properly identify the creature. "A Copycat..." She said. "And a vicious one too."

"And a vicious one too." It repeated, perfectly imitating her tone and voice. Anita stared at it, a little reluctant to strike it down. They had domesticated Copycats back home and she was quite fond of them.

Wild Copycats, however, were much larger and actual predators, and this one was no exception. She hoped it hadn't already helped itself to the others.

"The strongest will thrive in the new world!" The Copycat proclaimed, staring at her. They were, generally, creatures unable to invent their own sentences. But strangely, they were more than capable of understanding the sounds of other creatures and imitating them perfectly. And when it came to human sentences, they were more than capable of applying sentences they already knew to new ones, implying intelligence.

"Is that so?" Anita asked it, raising her finger. She was reluctant to kill it, of course, but she could not let it get away while Marionetta

and Ciela were still out of commission, unprotected, in the area. "Do you know anything about the new world?"

"The strongest will thrive in the new world!" The copycat proclaimed, as it slowly pawed her way towards her. She caught sight of her own face reflected in the Copycat's own, mirror like one. She sighed.

"Anything else you want to say?" She asked. An idea struck her.

"Rose Calanthe."

"My name is Rose Calanthe. And we are going to be very close!" It then gave off a little giggle.

"Not all that interesting." Anita muttered. She imagined she said that sort of thing to everyone. "Uh... Charlotte?"

"Charlotte, honey, you need to stop taking yourself so seriously."

She scratched her nose thoughtfully, wondering if any of that could be of use to her, but while she was distracted the beast pounced forward, towards her. She raised her hand and it shot backward again. It gave a yelp of pain.

"I'm not defenseless, you know." She said, annoyed. "I just thought I would ask you questions."

"This place is completely defenseless. How has it remained standing so long?"

It was Calanthe's voice again. She found it interesting that it was primarily imitating members of the Black Sun. It must have been nearby while they were discussing their plan.

"Jump on me again, and you will regret it." Anita said, as it circled her patiently.

"I highly doubt that."

It jumped at her again, its head bowed over. She knew better than to strike it on the skull... it was made of a strange kind of material that repelled magical attacks straight back at whoever cast them. So instead she waved her arms in circular motion, causing the leaves below its feet to rise and swirl around its head, blinding it.

She stepped aside as it landed where she had been standing before, clawing at its eyes as the leaves all swirled around it. The leaves, as they were pulled away, would fly back up, as if nothing had happened. And there were so many of them flying in its face at once, it could not possibly do enough to uncover its vision completely.

Satisfied that it would be occupied for the foreseeable future, Anita limped away from it, intent on completing her task. Hopefully, no other creatures were lurking in the area.

She came across the clearing and winced. A large creature, a kind of bird, stood over a body, its neck bent over. It turned around to face her, glaring intently. Anita stared back. It was not a predator; it was a scavenger. And those black legs sticking out of its mouth...

"Easy." She said. 'As long as you do not eat me, we have no quarrel."

It continued to eat, but it kept a close eye on her as she stepped past it.

"Marionetta!"

She was lying on top of Ciela, slumped over. She staggered over to her, placing her hands on her and shaking her gently. She moaned, and shifted around. Relief filled her. She was perfectly fine... or at least, still very much alive and able to recover. She checked her over quickly, and winced. It was nasty, especially the arm. But Ciela's injuries were nothing to laugh at either.

Ciela was covered in wounds, from head to toe. Nearly all of them were serious. The cut in her side that Marionetta tried to fix had been very close to being fatal, and as it had been unattended for far too long...

She would almost certainly die if she weren't taken care of right away. It broke her heart to leave Marionetta in her condition, but Ciela likely was in a critical state. She had to prioritize her recovery first.

She cast another look behind her, to double check to make sure that the bird was focused on eating what remained of Charlotte. It had turned away from her, apparently having decided that she was not a threat.

Anita focused her attention back on Ciela, satisfied that she could finally get to work. The next several minutes went by unbelievably slowly. She had to go over every inch of Ciela's body to check for any signs of injury she might have missed. And in the case of the wound Marionetta tried to fix herself... she had to reopen it, to check on her organs to make sure they were all there and functioning, and to clean them properly.

Thankfully, nothing had been lost beyond her repair, and eventually Ciela looked perfectly peaceful. She could do nothing to wake her up, so she wiped the sweat off her brow and turned her attention on Marionetta.

Although Marionetta's injuries were overall much less life threatening, she had been much more deeply tortured than Ciela had. She had not noticed her hand injury when she had checked her, for example, and the deep scratches in her back, although far from fatal, must have hurt.

She beat Charlotte like this? Anita thought wildly, looking down at her in shock. How?

That didn't matter. She had to take care of her injuries as well, promptly. The more she looked at the hand, the more she worried the nerves and bones were damaged beyond repair. The hand was completely shattered.

Exhaustion was already setting in. Her own injuries had not been fully healed when she began operating, and these wounds were enough to tire her out even if she were in perfect health. But she couldn't give up now. Marionetta had no one else to turn to.

She began her work with earnest, starting with the injured hand. All the blows, cuts, and scrapes Marionetta had received faded away

under her touch. She had to fight to keep herself working. Her entire body was screaming for her to stop, but she still pushed on.

When Marionetta was completely healed, she collapsed completely, right on top of her. Embarrassed, she managed to push herself away from the other girl so that she flopped onto the ground, sprawled there.

She was completely worn out at this point. She had to take a moment to recover her magical energy. It would take longer than usual due to her still serious physical injuries, but that didn't matter. She had saved them. Somehow, she had done it.

Ciela's leg moved, back and forth. She muttered something, shifting back and forth. Anita looked hopefully towards her, hoping that she would awaken, but she did not. She groaned, as she shifted back, closing her eyes. Well, they weren't going anywhere until...

Something loud cracked behind them.

She sat up hurriedly, ignoring her exhaustion, as she scrambled around. She thought the bird had made that sound, but it had not. It was looking off in the distance, warily staring at something.

"What is the matter?" Anita asked, as she forced herself to her feet. She winced as she did so... she needed a bit more time, still. But she managed to walk forward to get a better look at what it was looking at.

There was a bright white thing some distance away, with a long white arm sticking out of it. She stared at it for a while as it moved back and forth. How had she missed that?

She jumped as another arm shot up. And then both arms slammed down on the center of the object.

Another loud crack filled the air, and a familiar girl sat up in the cocoon, looking almost bored. She slid out of the cocoon, in a snakelike fashion, and twisted her body around so that her belly was facing the ground. Her hair fell across her face.

Anita found the sight strangely unsettling. It was not natural for a person to move like that. She almost looked as if she had no bones at all.

And then, she spoke.

"So you have recovered." She said. "I have need of you."

She had recognized her from this distance? Nonplussed, Anita approached her. But in her weakened state, found herself reluctant to do so. Everything about this girl bothered her. Her general appearance, her actions, and of course... the way she just up and left her by the barrier, while she was still injured.

"Yes?" Anita asked stiffly, unsure of what the girl wanted.

She smiled at her as she slid out of the shell of webbing. The leaves beneath her barely rustled as she slithered forward some distance before bending herself backward, into a more upright position. Anita did not look away from her. She confidently stared back at her, almost wondering if she was going to attack.

"The Black Widow... Charlotte. Where did she go?"

"Dead." Anita said promptly. The girl bent her head, as her hair sort of jolted backward, like a strong wind had just hit her. "Marionetta defeated her."

Selene stood completely still, her expression unreadable. Anita could not puzzle out what she was feeling. Her face, or what little she could see of it, had no real reaction at all.

And then she smiled. "That is great to hear." She said. "I was really worried that Charlotte would get away."

Anita stared at her. She could not point her finger on it, but something about the situation was making her uneasy.

Selene walked past her, brushing her own hair gently with her hand. "Don't be so nervous." She said. "I would never harm a human."

Anita stiffened, a little taken aback by her choice of words.

"Where is the next witch?"

"What?"

"You heard me." Selene said. "Where is the next witch? I need a general direction."

"The next witch?"

Anita looked her over, somewhat reluctantly. There were large cuts across her robe, including a nasty looking one across her chest. Oddly, although the clothes themselves looked as if they were torn the pieces, the girl in front of her looked perfectly healthy.

"Not right now." Anita said. "We need to take some time to recover. I would very much appreciate if you stayed with us and- "

Selene cut her off, almost immediately. "No." She said. "We have no time for that."

Anita bristled. "Excuse me?"

"I must take out the remaining witches, posthaste."

I? She was far from the only person fighting here.

"If I am not much mistaken." Anita replied, her voice cold. "You were only just now soundly defeated by Charlotte. And yet you wish to go after another witch? Without any support?"

"That's right." Selene said. "These witches aren't going to kill themselves, you know."

"Of course not." Anita said. "But we need to be smart about how we go about this- "

Selene waved her hand dismissively. "That's no fun at all." She said airily. "I would much rather fight."

"Excuse me...?"

"I will not ask you again." Selene said. "Where can I find another witch?"

Anita could not believe it. This girl was completely serious. A part of her wanted to lash out at her and give her a piece of her mind, but she found herself hesitating.

And then Ciela called out to them.

"Hey..."

Surprised, Anita turned around and, miraculously, found herself running back to her side, despite the pain. "Ciela!" She said hurriedly, as she leaned in closer to her. "Are you still hurt? Did I miss anything?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine." She said. She sounded tired, but that was to be expected. "What happened?"

"Do you not know?"

"Someone was fighting Charlotte." She recalled. "And then..."

She touched her side, gingerly where she had been impaled.

"Something stabbed me..."

"So Charlotte did not do it?"

"No, no. I don't think so. She had told me she didn't want to kill me because I put up such a great fight."

"If you were so strong, you would not have lost."

Selene had followed her over here. She did not seem to want to stop stroking her own hair with her hands.

Ciela groaned. "Hello, Selene." She said. "I didn't see you there."

Selene smiled. "Well, she seems perfectly fine." She said. "I will take leave of you, now..."

"Wait..."

"Yes?"

Her tone sounded perfectly neutral and uncaring, but Anita had a funny feeling that she would not appreciate being told to stay.

"I'll come with you!" Ciela said, trying to sit up.

"What?" Anita looked hopelessly at her. "In your condition?"

"I'm perfectly fine." Ciela said dismissively. "I just need to wake up a little."

"You need more rest." Anita stressed, as Ciela got to her feet. "No, please... lay down..."

"I'm fine, Anita." Ciela assured her, as she stretched. "I feel great."

She winced suddenly, bending over in pain. Anita reached for her, trying to help her, and Ciela allowed her to treat the injury. "Thanks." She gasped out. "Maybe... you should come too. Just in case."

"But Ciela..."

She looked down at her feet. Surprised, Ciela followed suit, and for the first time noticed Marionetta lying there at her feet.

"Oh no!" Ciela said, bending over. "What is she doing here? Is she alright?"

"She is." Anita said calmly. "Please, do not worry about her. I have taken care of her."

"Taken care of her?" She repeated, as she checked her over herself. "But she looks terrible!"

"You do not look so great either, to tell you the truth." Anita said.

"Oh, ha ha." Ciela said dryly. "At least Callisto still loves me." She ran her hands across Marionetta's body, checking for any injuries.

Satisfied that Anita had taken care of her, and well, she pulled away. "But what happened?" She asked. "Did something go wrong at HQ?"

"Uh, no." Anita said. "Marionetta.... Came out here on her own, I think. Looking for you."

"Looking for..."

She looked down at her in horror. "Why would you do that?" She asked, upset. "You could have been seriously hurt!"

"She was." Anita said. "Trust me, it was not pretty."

"What happened to her?" She asked quietly. She looked extremely guilty. Anita wondered if she was blaming herself, feeling guilty over what had happened to her.

"Ciela." Anita said. "Look at me."

She did not, at first, but Anita did not repeat herself. Instead she moved closer to her and just sat there for a couple of minutes. Eventually, Ciela did give her a look. Her eyes were misty.

"Was it- "

"No." Anita said firmly. "Marionetta is going to be fine. She came to save your life, and did."

Ciela shook her head. "If I was stronger... if I had real power she would never have- "

"No." Anita said. "You have done all that you can. There is no shame in that. There is never any shame in that." She wrapped her arm around her in an affectionate gesture. "Marionetta looks up to you for a reason, you know." Anita said. "When we were stuck in that book all she would talk about is how you would take care of everything."

"And I let her down..."

"No." Anita repeated, this time much more firmly "If Marionetta thought less of you for losing, she would never have tried to come to your aid."

Ciela sat there, staring at Marionetta's sleeping face for a while longer, and let out a sigh. "I'm being stupid." She said at last. "This isn't the time for this."

She stood up. Anita smiled at her and followed suit. Selene was standing some distance away, completely uninterested in the events unfolded.

"Selene." Ciela said. "I would be honored if you would lend us your power in this fight."

Selene tilted her head to the side, giving off that small, lovely smile of hers. "Very well." She said. "If I must...."

"It is not like you can find these witches on your own." Anita told her. "You can surely be a bit more grateful for our assistance."

"I must consider the needs of the colony." Selene said. "I would be more than happy to spend weeks and months tracking down each witch here... but I admit it will be much quicker if I had a... a guide. To point me in the right direction."

"You're blind, aren't you?" Ciela asked, raising a finger to her mask. "But I've noticed you can get around somewhat on your own."

Selene stiffened. She touched her mask, adjusting it slightly. "That is not a fact I usually like announced out loud." She admitted. "But if you must know... yes, I am very much blind, and am reliant completely on my other senses. Certain things are beyond me."

"A blind warrior?" Anita asked, sounding doubtful. "I had thought as much, but I do not see how that is possible..."

"I assure you that fighting is most certainly not one of the things I struggle with." Selene said. "I have already fought by your side once, Ciela North, and I expect great things from you, Rose Anita... I have no qualms about joining you."

"Excellent." Ciela said. "Now that we have that out of the way- "

"I'm coming too."

She started. Marionetta had stood up when no one was looking, shorter than all of them, her hat drawn over her eyes.

"What?" Ciela repeated. "No, Marionetta. Please, this is way beyond your level... You have to get back to HQ."

"That's not an option!" Marionetta shouted at her. "No... I'm not going to stand by and let these things burn this colony to the ground! If I hadn't come when I did, Charlotte would have killed you both!"

"Both?" Selene repeated. Her voice dry. "I'll have you know I was only pretending to be injured. I was very close to killing her myself if you hadn't interrupted me."

Marionetta flinched. "Wha-what?" She repeated. She looked flustered and suddenly embarrassed. "I... what?"

"Did you really think someone as weak as Charlotte could have beaten me?" Selene asked, sounding amused. "No, I was just biding my time, waiting for the opportune time to strike."

"R-really?"

"Yes, really." Selene said, in a bored sort of way, as she flipped her long black hair over her shoulder carelessly.

Anita found this strange. "Wait a minute." She said. "If that was true, why were you still in her webbing when I arrived? If you were just waiting for her to drop her guard, then you could have done so when Marionetta challenged her."

"She was too far away." Selene said immediately. "I would have lost the element of surprise if I had done that." She was still smiling that empty, small smile.

Anita crossed her arms, examining her closely. This was an odd development, one that did not make a whole lot of sense to her. "So you were just lying there, for over an hour after Charlotte died? Why?"

"I did not initially realize she was dead." She said. "I thought she was merely hiding herself and was waiting for her to reappear."

The answers came just as quickly as she had asked her questions, but something about the whole thing rubbed her the wrong way.

"But what about- "

"We haven't the time for this." Ciela interjected. "Marionetta, go home. That's final."

"Home?" She repeated, her voice unusually shrill. "I haven't a home to go to because of these...!"

"We cannot ask her to walk back to HQ on her own." Anita told her. "Honestly, it is a miracle she got here in one piece to begin with..."

"So what do we do, then?" Ciela asked. She sounded exhausted.

"We take her with us." Anita said simply. "She is not defenseless; her powers are rapidly expanding past simply controlling people like puppets."

"Take her with us?" Ciela repeated. "Is that really... Our best option?" She looked somewhat reluctant.

"We cannot afford to waste any more time." Anita said. "The summoning, I'm sure, is well under way."

The lights above were still flickering, after all. They had not shut down the spell itself, apparently. It was still being cast, as the Black Sun had intended.

"We need to band together and stop the Black Sun." Anita went on. "Ciela, Marionetta... Selene too, I suppose... we're all the Colony has right now, until reinforcements arrive."

Ciela nodded in agreement, confidently. Selene did nothing except widen her smile. And Marionetta clenched her fists. "I'm... I'm ready!" She said. "I'm not going to run away anymore!"

She was not going to hide behind others for this fight. She wanted to stand on her own two feet for once and do something for herself.

"If that's what you really want..." Ciela said slowly. "I won't stop you. But please understand that this is going to be very dangerous. I've lost to two of these witches already and it's very possible I could lose against the remaining three as well." She clenched her own fist and thrust it forward. "We're going to have to work together to overpower these things." She said. "All of us."

Anita smiled, bringing her own hand forward. "I would follow you anywhere." She said. "Assuming that Rose Karuma is not in the other direction of course..."

Selene laughed. "What a strange group." She said. "But I'll play along." She stuck out her own fist to join time.

"And I... will do my best!" Marionetta proclaimed, being the final girl to join the circle.

In that moment, they all knew. They all felt united in a way that made them feel invincible. The Black Sun was going to die. And nothing was going to change that.

Rolf... where are you? Marionetta thought, as she looked in between her new-found comrades. *I hope you're safe...*

She could not bear it anymore. She had to know where he was. She closed her eyes, trying to reach out to him.

And she saw a face staring at her.

"You're a cute one, aren't you?" The witch gushed, as she placed a hand on his chest. "Wow, so strong, too! What's your name? How old are you? What do you do for a living? Can you fight? What's your favorite food?"

Marionetta broke the connection, unable to wrap her head around the horrible thing she had just seen.

That monster.

"Rolf is being tortured!" She blurted out, startling the others. "We have to go save him!"

"What?"

"Really?"

"Why should I care....?"

"A witch... a witch with bright red hair is..." She could not find the word for it. "Uh, forcing herself on him....?"

Ciela could not help it. She laughed, despite Marionetta's glare. Selene looked unimpressed, but Anita's expression darkened. "This is no laughing matter." She said. "Calanthe is not a foe to be taken

lightly, especially when men are involved. We must rescue him, posthaste."

"Calanthe?" Selene's expression suddenly shifted into something else entirely. Her smile gave way to a fierce grimace. She looked almost animalistic. "We have a score to settle..."

"Kidnapping men is the kind of thing she would do." Anita said, nodding. "No one would put up with her if given the choice, you see."

"Excellent..." Selene murmured, her voice rather husky and low pitched. "I look forward to meeting her again."

"Maybe Rolf let himself get captured?" Ciela asked. She sounded, despite the situation, very much amused. "Maybe he would want it this way."

"You know her not, Ciela." Anita admonished, wagging her finger at her condescendingly. "She will toss him away when she gets bored of him, I assure you. We cannot let her have her way with him."

"Don't say it like that..." Marionetta moaned. "Please..."

"We can't just talk about it." Ciela said, taking charge. "Let's go get her. Marionetta... you're going to have to track her down."

Marionetta nodded. "I... think I can do that, actually." She said. "She's with Rolfe, and I have a connection with him, so..."

She raised her finger and a transparent string materialized into existence from her finger. "We will just have to follow this line, and we will have her."

"Line?" Selene repeated. "What line?"

"Just stay close to us, okay?" Ciela told her. "Marionetta knows what's she doing."

Marionetta beamed with pride for a moment, before she remembered that the guy she really, really liked was being held against his will. Or at least, she hoped it was against his will... Calanthe, now that she thought about it, was really, really pretty...

"Don't let yourself get distracted, Marionetta." Ciela said firmly, placing a hand on your shoulder. "We're going to need you to focus if we're going to save him."

Marionetta nodded. She couldn't let herself get worked up over the implications of the situation. She... or rather, she and her friends needed to act now, and not later.

...

Rolf was not sure what to make of the situation he was in.

"What kind of drink would you like?"

The woman speaking to him was lounging in the sun chair next to him. Her bright eyes wide and staring at him. She was sitting on her stomach and was wearing not much at all, besides an admittedly rather flattering red bikini. Her bare feet and legs bounced back and forth. She just could not seem to sit still.

He shrugged. "I usually stick with just water." He said. "But there's this tea that the local restaurant makes that I like."

Calanthe smiled. She beckoned her finger and another girl, one that looked exactly like her, only dressed in a maid's outfit with thigh high stockings, immediately jumped to her. "Please fetch him his drink." She said.

The girl scowled, shooting him a flirty glance as she disappeared into thin air.

"Please excuse my..." She coughed, rolling her eyes slightly.

"Friends."

He looked to the pool, where five other identical girls were splashing themselves in the water. They all were shooting suggestive glances his way every few seconds, like they wanted him to join them.

"Why do you all look the same?" He asked curiously. "That's not normal, is it?" Humans had trouble telling his siblings apart, maybe he was having the same problem with these Fox girls.

She giggled. "For us, it is." She said. "We're a bit of a strange bunch, you see."

"I can see that." He said. She laughed again, slapping the chair a little. "Is there a reason for it though?"

"Hmmm..." She placed a finger on her chin thoughtfully. "Well, no. None that I can think of."

"Uh. Really?"

"Yes, really." She replied. "Just go with it, alright? And enjoy yourself."

Enjoy himself? The colony was burning, the spider lady was still running around out there, and this strange girl wanted him to have tea with her.

"I really need to be going." He said, beginning to stand up. "The Colony..."

"Your tea, sir."

The girl had appeared right next to him. He nodded, and reached out to take the drink, out of politeness... only for the girl to side step his reach entirely and sit with him on his chair, so close that they were touching.

"Your tea, sir." She said again, this time in a much sultrier sort of voice. Rolf narrowed his eyes. "I really appreciate you rescuing me and all..." He said again. "But the place I live in is in- "

"Guys!"

Another girl, wearing flip flops, a tank top, and incredibly short shorts, raced up alongside the pool, waving her arms around. "The fighting is over!" She shouted. "There's nothing to worry about!"

The girls in the pool all, unanimously, raised their arms and cheered, sending splashes of water upward into the sky.

"Wow, talk about a lucky break!" Calanthe commented, still smiling brightly, as the serving girl nodded her head vigorously. "I guess

there's nothing to worry about now!"

"Yeah..." Rolf said. "I guess..."

He was feeling increasingly uncomfortable. These girls were nice, but something about them seemed off, and he had the distinct impression that there was more to them than meet the eye. The girl who had come in to deliver the good news jumped in the pool with the other girls, causing them to shriek with laughter.

"Sir, your drink..."

He shook his head. "I'd really like to see everyone for myself." He said. "Thanks for everything, but I really need to- "

"Why the rush?" Calanthe asked curiously. "Do you not like being here, with me?"

His eyes ran along her back and legs. "Of course I do." He said. "But my friends... I need to go see my friends...."

"They can wait, can't they?" Calanthe asked. "Please... you wore yourself out fighting that hideous witch Charlotte, you need to take it easy and relax."

"But I- "

"Calanthe, you degenerate!"

Immediately her demeanor changed. Scowling, she sat up in her chair, looking towards where the voice had come from. Immediately, in perfect sync, the other girls did the same.

There, stepping out of the woods, were several familiar faces. Anita led the way, and seemed to have been the one to shout out. She was glaring daggers directly at Calanthe, her expression cold and icy. Next to her was Marionetta, who was instead staring at him, in complete shock. Next to her stood Ciela, who was looking at the other girls in confusion. And on Anita's other side stood the beautiful girl he had seen the other day... Selene, the killer from Cereza.

"Great." Calanthe commented, slumping in her chair. "The local girl scouts have arrived..."

The girls all strode toward her, onto the concrete. Anita looked around at the pool, frowning deeply.

"What a disgusting use for your powers." She said, waving her hand around at all the statues and other lavish decorations. "A pool? Really?"

Calanthe rolled over in her chair, onto her back, yawning slightly. "Anita, darling, you don't know how to have fun." She said. "None of you do, really..."

"I take offense to that." Ciela told her. "My boyfriend thinks I'm a lot of fun to be around."

"Well, good for you, I guess." Calanthe said coolly, as her sunglasses slid down across her eyes. She leaned back into her chair and stared at them. "I'm surprised to see you all together." She said. "You're all friends, then?" Her eyes fell on Marionetta. "You are a new face. What's your name, sweetheart?"

Ciela answered for her. "This is the mighty Marionetta." She said. "Her enemies always bow to her every whim."

Marionetta scrunched up her face, trying her best to look intimidating.

"Really." Calanthe said, sounding unimpressed. "Just like how you're supposed to be the strongest woman in the world?"

Selene smiled and shook her head. "Leave her alone." She said. "You know, Rose Calanthe, it is not becoming to insult another warrior in this way. We came to fight, not to squabble like children."

"Yes, yes." Calanthe said impatiently. "You want me dead so that you can get through the barrier." She pointed upwards at the light above her. "Well, that's not going to happen." She said. "I'm having a lot of fun right now, and have no intention of- "

Rolf leapt up, rushing towards the group of girls. Calanthe moaned, placing a melodramatic hand to her forehead.

"Why do they always run?" Calanthe moaned.

Water rose from the pool and formed a giant tentacle, lashing out at Rolf's legs. But Anita reacted accordingly. She flew forward, her arms outstretched, and the water splashed to the ground, as ordinary water should.

"Your powers are nothing spectacular." She said, laughing a little.

"You will suffer greatly by my hand. Do not fret, Rose Calanthe, because you have brought this upon yourself." Calanthe gave her a dark look.

"Anita, Sweetie, you're embarrassing yourself."

The drops of water were sliding towards her, across the ground and under her feet. They crawled up her leg quickly, covering it entirely. She struggled, trying to move away from it, but her leg would not budge.

She shrieked in pain as the water tightened around her, crushing her leg in between it. Her other leg gave way as she collapsed.

"No you don't!"

Ciela charged forward now, directly towards Calanthe, but the girls in the pool had jumped out of the water, right at her. These girls looked identical to Calanthe. The only difference between them were slightly differently designed swimsuits, all of which were very revealing.

She had no time to process the information. She had to get them out of the way. She clenched her hand into a fist and attacked, unleashing a mighty blow to the first one. She dodged, floating in the air as she looked at her with an amused expression. The other girls quickly surrounded her from every side.

She spun around on her heel, attempting a mighty spin kick, but each girl, miraculously, evaded that attack as well.

Then a pair of legs wrapped around her throat.

"Surprise!"

Ciela gasped as she raised her arms, trying desperately to pry the girl off her, but to no avail. The grip was tightening around her, preventing her from breathing properly. The girl on her grabbed hold of her hair for balance, as her thighs tightened.

Ciela staggered around, trying to throw her off somehow, but nothing she tried could get her off. She took another several steps, frantically trying to think of some way to overcome her opponent, before the ground underneath slipped.

Calanthe laughed as Ciela awkwardly splashed into the pool. She was having an absolute ball. "Maybe this is what we needed." She said. "A little party before the end of your world!"

Marionetta looked hopelessly at Selene, desperate for her to do something, but she had not moved at all since the fighting had started. All she was doing was staring straight ahead, taking in what was happening. "Selene!" Marionetta whispered frantically. "Aren't you going to do something?"

Marionetta turned back to Rolf, who was struggling on the ground, the girl dressed as a maid straddling him, and an unspeakable rage burned within her. "Get off him!"

Rolf jolted forward, across the ground towards her. The girl, although surprised, held on tight to his hair as she shouted out in joy.

Anita lashed out her hand towards the girl, and a magical light shot forward from her hand. The Calanthe clone screamed as the force sent her flying through the air, her body flipping around in midair...

And just as suddenly, shot herself towards Anita like a cannonball, her foot outstretched. Anita's face took the full force of the kick, and she could feel the bones in her face crack from the sheer force of the blow. But she could do nothing but take it. Her foot was still stuck to the concrete.

Ciela rose out of the pool, gasping for breath. The girl was right in front of her, so she tried to wrap her arms around her throat to

strangle her.

But a pair of hands pressed down on her head and she was shoved back underwater. She gasped and fought and struggled, trying to claw at the girl. But she could not seem to be able to focus enough to use the God Hand, and without it, she couldn't hope to overpower anyone in this situation.

She heard someone call her name, and someone slammed into the girl above her. She gave a shriek of delight as she was knocked into the water, and Ciela burst out from under the water, taking in a deep breath of glorious air.

"Huh." Calanthe said. "Maybe I should consider kidnapping cute girls... that'll keep the boys coming to me, for sure."

She leaned back in her chair as Rolf was thrown from the pool, his back slamming into the concrete. Marionetta screamed.

Selene stepped forward, brushing her hair backward with a flourish. "Now, Calanthe." She said, stepping past Anita, who was crying out in pain as the maid girl beat her with intense blow after blow. "You will die a most painful death." Her mask glinted in the light of the lamps set to illuminate the area.

"You're awfully confident." Calanthe commented. She uncrossed and then crossed her legs. "I do like that about you, Selene, truly, but there is such a thing as being... well, overconfident. Do you know what I mean?"

Selene smiled. "Your words mean nothing to me, Calanthe." She said. "I am a woman of action."

She brushed her hair again, standing completely still as the bikini clad girls surrounded her. "These people..." She said. "They're all you, aren't they?"

Calanthe sat up in her chair. "Very astute." She said. "Most people don't see them for what they are right away. Most are under the impression I simply have several identical sisters."

Selene merely smiled. "I am not most people." She said, her voice becoming low and sinister. "As you will soon discover..."

"You're worse than Anita." Calanthe said dismissively. "You're not scary."

Selene snarled, and with shocking speed made a beeline for Calanthe, pushing her way past the clones. However, they tried to put up a fight. Magical attacks from all sides hit her, but they did not even slow her down at all. Deep gashes tore into her body, tearing her dress into shreds, but she didn't even slow down.

"Do you not feel pain or something?" Calanthe asked, as Selene rushed towards her with astonishing speed. "I mean, come on... you're not bad looking, you need to take care of yourself."

Selene snarled at her, leaping forward, but the chair moved backward, out of her reach. Calanthe leaned back on it. She seemed wholly uninterested in fighting. "Must you really spoil my night?" She asked. "I have already defeated you once, don't make me do it again. I had such great plans for the End of the World, too."

Selene spat at her, the acid flying. Calanthe jolted out of the chair, spinning it around so that it blocked it from touching her. "I was going to have a nice dinner, get to know Rolf a little better, maybe dance to some music..."

Selene leapt up on the chair, pinning it against the ground, and jabbed her claw downward, through it, trying to hit her. Calanthe rolled to the side, easily avoiding it.

"We were going to have such a great time." Calanthe lamented, as the concrete below her began to shift and move, absorbing her body into it. "We would talk and laugh and fall in love."

She sunk into the ground, outright. Selene jumped off the chair and honed her senses. She could feel her shifting underground, under the earth. And...

"She's getting away!"

The real Calanthe was drifting away from them, far from her reach. She growled, her temper flaring, as she turned to follow her.

"Ah, no. I don't think so."

Another Calanthe approached her, smiling warmly. "Make no mistake, Selene." She said. "I am more than willing to fight you. However, you will have to get through my shadows, first."

Selene smiled viciously. "It is not often I get to kill a single person more than once." She said. "This will be fun..."

"Sweetie, you really don't know what you're getting into..."

"The same to you." Selene said coolly, as she let her mind clear. There was only the fight now. The fight she had to win.

Her hands turned to claws, her wings burst forth, and she leaned over, in a fighting position.

"Not so pretty anymore, are you?" Calanthe commented, eyeing her claw like feet. "It has to be hard meeting boys looking like that..."

Selene snarled, baring her fangs. Words meant nothing to her now. The only thing that was important to her was blood...

"But I think it's your personality that's the main problem" Calanthe said quickly. "That is much, much more important than how you look."

Selene slashed at her with her claws, causing her to sidestep the blow. "Imagine if this nice guy you really liked came to your house to get to know you better." She said. Her eyes fell on Selene's hair, which lashed out at her like a whip. She raised her hand, and suddenly the concrete at their feet molded and twisted into a barrier between them. "And you came to the door looking like that, with intent to kill him because you don't know how to communicate."

Selene snarled again, and spat out more poison. It touched the barrier, and to Calanthe's surprise, burned right through it. "Wow, that really is something." She said. "But what if you accidentally did that to this guy?"

Selene jabbed her claw forward, straight through the hole in the barrier causing it to shatter completely and disappear. Calanthe raised her arm, almost lazily, and caught it mid motion. Electricity coursed through her fingers and into Selene.

Instead of pulling away, Selene snarled and raised her other arm. Calanthe looked a little taken aback as she narrowly avoiding that blow as well.

"You sure can take a shock." Calanthe commented. "That was no low voltage, let me tell you."

Anita glared at the girls surrounding her, as they laughed at her predicament. Her leg was still fastened tight to the concrete, and she could not break whatever curse was holding it there. Her face was battered and bruised due to repeated attacks by the Calanthe in front of her.

"Okay, Sweetie." Calanthe said. "Next we'll work on your nose."

Calanthe punched her, hard, across her nose. Blood spurted out. It felt like it had been broken. The other girls cheered. Calanthe pulled away, leaning in closer to inspect it as Anita reeled.

"Fantastic!" She chirped. "It was just a little bit too straight before, but now your face has more character!"

Anita glared at her intently, her eyes narrowed, as she laughed again. Anita raised her finger, and a magical bullet shot out towards Calanthe's smug, ugly face.

She should not have even bothered. The bullet disappeared before it had even touched her. Her powers were just too great. Calanthe was, despite of all her flaws, one of the best at what she did.

Calanthe struck her again, and this time Anita keeled over entirely, her back bending over backwards in a bridge position. The stubborn wad of enchanted water holding her leg to the floor prevented her from being knocked to the ground entirely. She struggled, vainly, back and forth trying to pull or push herself back into a standing

position. But before she could, Calanthe casually slid over her, straddling her waist.

“Surprise!”

Anita tried to raise her hands to defend herself, but the punches to the face, one after the other, came in quick succession. Too quick for her to even react to. She recoiled, flinched away, curled her fists, unclenched them... She could do nothing to defend herself from the onslaught.

Ciela was still in the pool, frantically trying to get her bearings. “Rolf!” She called out. “Rolf? Where are you...?”

Something burst out from the water behind her.

“Surprise!”

She screamed as once again her head was dunked underwater. This time, however, she was ready.

She grabbed hold of Calanthe’s arm, and with a mighty swing, brought her down onto the side of the pool. The concrete cracked as the woman cried in surprise. The figure vanished, disappearing outright.

Ciela covered her eyes, worried that it was some kind of trick, but a couple of seconds passed and she realized that she had overpowered that particular clone. It was no more.

“Ciela!” Rolf was there next to her. “Come on, we have to help Anita...”

She nodded, but the water around them began to swirl violently in a violent sort of whirlpool. She grimaced, holding onto Rolf tightly as they tried to get out.

The current was becoming overwhelmingly powerful. She had no choice but to throw him out, the rest of the way. He landed on the concrete, turned, and reached his hand out to her.

She reached forward, taking it, and he pulled her out of the whirlpool. She cast a glance behind her, and the pool suddenly burst

upward in a gigantic splash. The water covered them both, and then settled over them.

It was as if they were still submerged, she realized in horror as her feet lifted off the ground. The water covered over them like a blanket, blocking out any air from getting into them. She tried to swim forward, to break through the spell, but the water moved along with her, keeping her from reaching her goal.

She tried not to panic, frantically shifting her head every which way, trying to think of a way out of the situation. She caught sight of a Calanthe standing some distance away, through the water, happily slapping around Anita.

This was all a big joke to her. Ciela realized. She wasn't even trying. Calanthe's powers dwarfed their own so badly, it was impossible to even begin to fight back. Her movements through the water became even more frantic as she desperately tried to escape.

Marionetta watched in horror as the fight unfolded. She could not even begin to understand what she was even looking at. So much was going on at once, it was completely overwhelming for her. Everyone was getting beat down, one after the other, and she... she... was just standing here. Unable to even move.

Calanthe wasn't even acknowledging her. The other clones... the several of them that were not fighting were too busy cheering for the ones that were. Two of them, however, had their arms wrapped around Rolf...

Rolf...

She could not let him get hurt. She had to stop the fighting, somehow. Any more of this, if it went on for any longer, someone was going to die.

She had to do something. Something... Something to get Calanthe to stop...

Rolf...

Calanthe...

Marionetta took control of him.

Calanthe smiled down at Rolf as she stroked his face. "You're not too hurt, are you?" She asked softly, as Ciela struggled blindly behind her. "That terrible girl didn't hurt you too badly, did she?" She trailed her hand downward.

Rolf coughed a little, spluttering some water. Calanthe neatly adjusted herself to give him more room, and stared down at him expectantly.

He shook his head as he bent over, coughing up some more water. "Thank.... You..." He coughed.

Calanthe preened a little, looking pleased with herself, as Rolf slowly got a hold of himself.

No, Ciela is drowning, I have to make this quick!

He looked up at her, staring at her with wide eyes. "Calanthe..."

"Yes?" Calanthe asked, leaning forward. "Can I get you anything?"

He reached out his hand and slowly wrapped it around hers. She reeled back, at first, completely surprised as his hand gently wrapped around hers. "What are you..."

"Will you marry me?"

The water behind Calanthe crashed downward. Ciela was thrown from the sphere, desperately trying to take in a breath of fresh air. Anita flinched, expecting yet another blow, but her attacker had stopped completely. She seemed to be in shock.

Selene shot her claw through the still clone, dissipated. It was an odd feeling, she thought absentmindedly. There was no blood.

Calanthe ignored all the activity around her. The only thing that mattered was the man in front of her. "What- why..."

"I have loved you ever since I set my eyes upon you." Rolf said.

"Your beauty is second to none, and as I got you know you the only

thing I could think of was how I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you."

Calanthe's mouth opened. And then closed again. She squeezed his hand tightly. "Rolf..." She said. "No one has ever... ever... said anything like that to me before..." She shook her head. "But I am presuming too much." She said, quickly. "Do you mean... what I think you- I mean, are you asking me if I would- "

"I am." Rolf said, his voice coarse with emotion. "Calanthe... will you marry me?"

She said nothing. All she did was throw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him in a tight hug. "Yes, yes, of course!"

Marionetta flinched, her own heart ached at what she was doing. But she had no other alternative. She had no choice but to move ahead, regardless of her own feelings. They would all be killed if Calanthe kept fighting.

If she kept fighting... If she kept fighting... was there a way to get her to stop?

The other clones were standing around, their expressions blank, although all looked happy with themselves. Selene could not understand it. She shifted back into her human form, trying to imagine herself in Calanthe's position. Her hair coiled up, into long thin needles, and she plucked it out with a gentle hand.

"Love...." Selene said, her voice bored, as she threw the needle absentmindedly at a clone. It dissipated almost immediately.

Anita saw this, and in a sudden, last ditch desperate move, took out the clone on top of her with a well-timed magical blast to the head. Her entire head exploded, before vanishing as the others had did. Whatever had happened, the clones did not seem to be acting as real people should. They were standing around absentmindedly. The 'real' Calanthe had become distracted by something.

Now she just needed to take the time to free herself...

Without Calanthe holding the water there, it was easy. As the water binds splashed to the ground, Anita used her power of flight to get back on her feet. More clones were standing some distance away, and she, frowning, took them out quickly. What had happened to make them act this way?

Her gaze fell on another clone, and she almost raised her hand again... but her eyes fell on Ciela, laying down on the ground behind her.

"Oh no..."

She took off, flying above the battlefield as quickly as she could to get there. She landed next to Ciela and quickly wrapped her arms around her, checking to see if she were still alive.

"Nearly drowned..."

She would have to get her breathing again. She placed her hands on her body and tried to get her going again.

It would be easy if she weren't on a battlefield and still in danger. Calanthe could strike at any time, and she would not be able to defend herself in the meantime. She hoped Selene, or even Marionetta could keep her distracted for the next several minutes.

Calanthe sat up, still smiling widely as she touched Rolf's face, as if she were not able to believe he were really there. "You have no idea how much this means to me sir..." She said. "So long have I waited for someone to truly... make me happy."

She nodded. She somehow seemed more spry and energetic than ever.

"We will not be married in the New World." She said. "And we will not be married in the Old One, either... no, we're going to get married during the Apocalypse, as fire rains from the sky, reshaping the world into something new, exciting, and different."

She smiled widely, sincerely. "I never thought I would meet you... here, now, in this way. My dreams are coming true."

"Neither did I." Rolf said hoarsely. They stared at each other, each unable to find the words they wanted to say.

"Please, come with me..." Calanthe said. "It must be quick. Another few hours and the sun will rise."

"The sun?"

"The Black Sun." She said. "Our Master."

"But... my love, are you not already...?"

"This?"

She pulled at the ear on top of her head, unconcerned. "Karuma is nothing to me." She said. "When he dies in His fire, I will be free at last. Free to marry you."

She smiled again.

"Do not concern yourself with me." She said. "I am more than just a witch. I am a girl... a very sweet, cute girl who desperately wants to be married."

She laughed. Rolf, after a very awkward pause, followed suit.

"That is all you want?"

Calanthe froze. She turned around to find Selene standing there, staring at them, completely unimpressed.

"What of it?" Calanthe asked, as she gripped Rolf tighter, as if shielding him. She glared at Selene distrustfully, as if expecting her to try something. There was genuine fear in that expression, Marionetta realized. Something about Selene addressing them in that moment deeply bothered her.

Selene did not frighten her. Marionetta knew that. Selene could not overpower her clones if they were fighting properly.

Marionetta watched as Calanthe tightened her grip around Rolf's arm. She wasn't scared of what Selene would do to her... she was scared of what Selene would do to try and get between her and Rolf.

"That is all you want?" Selene asked, as she stepped closer to them, her hair waving behind her, swatting the air violently. "To have a boyfriend?"

Calanthe glared at her. If looks could kill, Selene would be already dead. "I have everything else I want." She said, after a brief pause. Selene had not reacted at all to the gaze. She simply stood there, as a normal person would.

"I see." Selene said. "Man always desires more, I suppose."

"I'm sorry, did you just call me a man?"

Selene ignored her outrage and instead waved her arm in a circular motion, as if she had not been spoken to at all. She looked away from the new couple, towards the other direction.

"This girl is something else." Calanthe murmured to Rolf. "Uh, let's get out of here, okay? I don't want you to get hurt..."

"Neither of you are going anywhere." Selene said firmly, her head jolting back to them far too quickly to be completely natural. "No.... both of you will die here, by my hand, for the crimes you have committed this day."

What? No!

"Selene!" Marionetta shouted, waving her arms above her head. "Don't hurt Rolf, he's... he's not really evil, he's just he's just confused!"

Selene, she realized in horror, was the one person among them who had no idea that Rolf's affections towards Calanthe were nothing more than a façade to distract her. She had no idea that Marionetta's powers let her control other people, or that she was making him say these disgusting things to Calanthe. In her eyes, Rolf was now in league with them.

Selene completely ignored her. Instead her attention was focused entirely on the two people in front of her. Rolf and Calanthe. "This

will be a very red wedding indeed." Selene said, smiling. "We have no roses, but perhaps your blood will do."

Calanthe stared at her. "I'm sorry, but I have no idea what that's supposed to mean." She looked down at Rolf. "Get up." She hissed. "You can't fight her..."

Rolf nodded, and got to his feet. Calanthe pushed him behind her, her eyes on Selene. "Step any closer and I will kill you." She said. Her typical light, airy demeanor was gone. Now she was being completely serious.

Selene smiled. "You could do no such thing." She said. She stepped forward.

Marionetta flinched, half expecting Selene to be cut down where she stood, but Calanthe merely took another step back.

"I am warning you, sweetie." Calanthe said. "If you try and take him from me I will- "

Selene darted forward suddenly, practically becoming a blur. Calanthe growled, swinging her hand around to cause a powerful gust of wind to be kicked up, pushing her away. Selene grimaced, her feet digging into the concrete as she tried to brace herself against the wind.

She suddenly bent down on the ground and began slithering across it... like a snake. Calanthe shot a magic bullet at her, but she quickly evaded it, twisting her body in a bizarre angle to do so.

"Hmph." Calanthe snorted, as Selene flipped herself back around onto her stomach, twisting and writhing on the ground beneath her. Selene looked up at her, baring her fangs, as she scurried over to her.

"Just like a rat." Calanthe scoffed, as she waved her hand.

The ground beneath Selene twisted around her legs, forming a sort of binding that covered each of her limbs. She struggled, growling violently, twisting herself around to try and loosen herself.

Calanthe turned away, taking Rolf's arm and pulled at him. "Come on, love." She whispered. "We must leave now before..."

"Wait!"

She flinched, as her gaze fell on the girl who had spoken. Marionetta lowered her arm, her throat suddenly dry. Calanthe had never even looked at her before she had spoken out.

"Who are you?" Calanthe asked, her voice cold. Marionetta flinched away from her gaze.

"I'm just... I'm just..."

She had to find the words. She had to say something. Something that would get Calanthe to stay. Something...

"He's mine!"

She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide, horrified at what she had just said. Calanthe's mouth tightened into a thin line.

"Is that so?" She asked, her voice icy. "Well."

She let go of Rolf and took a step towards Marionetta, her arms spread wide. "Is this true, my love?" She asked.

Marionetta could not bring herself to make him do anything. He simply stood there, staring blankly.

Calanthe stared at him, a little disappointed. "I see." She said. "So you have a history with this girl."

She turned back to face Marionetta, and her hair began to flow behind her. Marionetta could feel the magical energy flowing around them.

"You are no match for me." Calanthe said, her feet rising off the ground. "Yet you have chosen to steal my beloved from me. I could kill you with a single blow, and yet you still try and claim him as your own." She raised a finger toward her. "You will suffer greatly, by my-"

She never got the rest of the words out. Because in that moment she let her defenses drop completely. Anita fired a magical bullet right at her, tearing her apart.

Anita lowered her hand as she disappeared. That had been a clone as well. Anita was exhausted, again, but Ciela was alright now. Ciela sat up and blinking at what she had just done. "Nice shot." She said. "Did we get the real one?"

"No." Anita said. "She got away..."

"Fools!"

Selene was still struggling with the concrete, but almost immediately after speaking she broke free, sending shatters of it everywhere.

"Impressive strength." Ciela commented.

With a single free hand, Selene was able to batter the remaining pieces into they were no more. She struggled and fought her way out of the other binds, and before long was standing again, breathing somewhat heavily.

"There are more of them!" She proclaimed. "This fight is not over!"

"What?" Anita asked, crossing her arms. "More what?"

"Clones, I would imagine." Ciela said. She was a little taken aback at how agitated the usually collected Selene was behaving. She seemed twitchy and irritable, and a deep instinct within her was telling her to keep her distance. She had the strong feeling that in this state Selene was dangerous, to people and monster alike.

"They must die." Selene said, turning around. "Die... Die... Die...."

"She is out of her mind." Anita muttered. "Should we intervene?"

"I think we may have to." Ciela said. She remembered how she had been told how Tomoko was the only one who could calm her down when she became too out of control. She would have to stop her before things got worse.

She got to her feet. "Hey, Selene." She said, trying to keep her voice light and friendly. "We need a little bit more time to regroup."

She whirled around and snarled. "Why?"

"Because we won't be able to fight at all if we don't." Ciela said, not intimidated in the least. "Please, you're not at your best either. Let's take a short break."

Selene's hair fell flat. "My best?" She repeated. She seemed a bit more composed. "Ah.... How so?"

"You can't just rush from fight to fight and expect to win them all." Ciela told her. "Here, look me look at you..."

She took another step forward. Selene tilted her head, as Ciela reached out for her arm and took it.

"This is nasty." She murmured, as she looked it over. It looked as if it had been broken by something. Possibly due to smashing it against a mound of concrete. It was, however, not beyond her power to heal. Selene stood quietly as Ciela placed her hands in her own, focusing intensely.

Magic burst forth from her hands and covered her in a comforting glow. Before long, her injuries were completely healed.

"All better?" Ciela asked, as Selene ran her hand over her skin, trying to find signs of the injuries.

"I think so." Selene said slowly. "So may we go now?"

Ciela frowned at her, but said nothing. Instead, she merely turned and walked back to Anita, who was busying looking over Marionetta and Rolf. She seemed amused about something.

"Playing Calanthe's lust against her." She was saying. "I am very impressed, Marionetta. I only wish we had ended her properly... It would have made a great story back home."

Marionetta was blushing furiously, but not because of her praise. Rolf was standing nearby too, looking very befuddled.

"What exactly happened?" He asked, his voice blank. "I don't remember a thing..."

"Well, Marionetta- "

"Some things are better left unsaid!" She squeaked, looking extremely nervous. "Um, please... I think we need to get a move on."

"Are you ready to go as well?" Selene asked her, as they approached the group. "Thank you for your enthusiasm..."

"Well, I, for one, am certainly not going anywhere." Anita huffed, crossing her arms. "Calanthe got away. I will not rest until she's six feet under the ground."

"But Calanthe is not here now." Selene said. "If you wish to follow her, we will have to hunt her down."

"Again?" Anita huffed. "The coward runs at the first opportunity."

"At least we got Rolf back." Ciela said, trying to defuse the situation. "That's something, right?"

"Rolf, how exactly did you find yourself in Calanthe's clutches?" Anita asked. "Most men have the good sense to run."

Rolf held his head with his hand. "I got beat pretty badly by this spider witch." He said. "She was just too strong..."

"Charlotte, huh?" Ciela murmured. "Well, that's a relief. We already beat her."

"You did?"

He looked surprised for a second, but then smiled. "Of course you did." He said. "You have magic."

"Actually, I lost too." Ciela said. "It was Marionetta who beat her."

"What, really?"

He turned to look at her, and Marionetta found himself melting under his gaze. She could not meet his eye, and instead looked down at

the ground.

"That's amazing, Marionetta!" He said. "Ciela must be rubbing off on you."

She flushed.

"We have no time for your human courtship rituals." Anita said, causing Marionetta to let out another surprised squeak. "We must be off. To hunt down the remaining Witches."

Rolf shook his head. "My... head has been bothering me." He said. "I can't... well, I can't even begin to fight, really."

"Hm." Anita said, looking him over. "Exhaustion, probably. Nothing we can do about that. I suppose someone should escort you back to Solaire's headquarters."

"He was... fighting the monsters before anyone else." Marionetta muttered, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. "He was caught out in the open..."

"Where did these things come from, anyway?" Rolf asked.

"Do not worry about it." Anita said. "We are taking care of the problem. Just go and rest."

"He can't go without an escort, though." Ciela told her. "We should go with him."

"And waste valuable time?" Anita asked. "No, I think we should just hide him here and allow him to recover. If we let these people continue with what they're doing, we will all die."

"Hide him?" Ciela repeated, scandalized. "Where? In the pool?"

"Or you could have Marionetta look after him." Anita told her. "She would like that."

Marionetta turned bright red.

"Marionetta isn't staying anywhere by herself." Ciela said firmly. "She needs to stick with us. She isn't effective without strong comrades backing her up..."

"Who cares?" Selene asked, sounding irritable again. "Let's just go. He can walk, correct?"

"A little..." Rolf admitted. "But it's kind of painful..."

"We are escorting him back, and that's final." Ciela said firmly. "But we will do so quickly."

Anita shook her head, but she did not argue.

"Can't you just use your portal thing?"

"In the middle of a summoning circle?" Anita asked, looking annoyed at the sheer stupidity of the question. "No, that would take us to whatever it is they are trying to bring over here. A cataclysmic creature of apocalyptic power..."

The girls fell silent.

"Sounds fun." Selene said. "Let's do it."

"We are not doing it, and that's final." Anita snapped. "Honestly, do you have some kind of death wish?"

"Yes." Selene said. "I wish to inflict death on all of my enemies."

Anita groaned.

"This is getting us nowhere." Ciela sighed. "Marionetta, Rolf... what do you think?"

Neither of them spoke for a while. Finally, Rolf answered.

"Just stick around for a couple of minutes and I'll call my pack here. They'll look after me."

"The pack?" Anita repeated. "Those wolves? That would work, wouldn't you say?"

"I would think so." Ciela said, remembering how powerful the Mother was. "Alright. We'll stay for a couple of minutes, then."

Anita still did not look completely satisfied, but she allowed the arrangement. After all, they all did need a little bit of rest.

Calanthe had left behind several chairs, enough for all of them. They all sat down, Selene further away from the others, as they waited for the wolves to show up.

Anita was deep in thought, and Ciela asked her what was on her mind. "Bah, just thinking of the best way to beat Calanthe." She said. "I wish Rolf was feeling better... the best plan I can think up was to have him assassinate her at the wedding. She deserves it."

Rolf had fallen asleep. He had tried not to show it, but he was worn out. Marionetta sat next to him, watching him intently. She did not look happy.

Ciela leaned in closer to Anita. "What do you think?" She asked her, her voice quiet

"I think many things." Anita replied, smirking.

"That's not funny." Ciela said, frowning. "If you don't know what I'm talking about, just ask."

"I am a witch, not a mind reader..."

"What do you think about what Marionetta did to distract Calanthe?" She asked. She was genuinely curious.

"A very clever move." She said, almost immediately. "Calanthe is well known for her loose- "

"No, I mean about Marionetta." She said. "She's not looking very happy, is she?"

"Of course she is not." Anita replied. "Calanthe got away, did she not? She probably wants her dead just as much as I do, at this point."

Anita was trying way too hard to be come off as being at ease, but Ciela knew her too well to fall for that. She was nervous, anxious to get going again.

"I'm not sure that's it." Ciela said quietly, trying to keep Marionetta from overhearing. "I think this is about Rolf, more than anything."

Anita sat there, thinking about it. "I am a Witch." She said. "I know nothing of marriage or love. I really could not say for sure, either way."

She sat up, poking Ciela in the side. "However, I do know that Marionetta has a great friend by her side. She will be fine."

She leaned back, getting herself comfortable again. "Do not worry about it so much." She said. "Life goes on, no matter what."

Ciela looked away from her, towards the lights in the sky, and wondered if that was true. Because if they failed here today, their lives would end here.

"Callisto could probably be helpful, actually." Anita said slowly.

"Maybe we could get him to stand in for Rolf."

Ciela scowled. "As if." She said. "You're not marrying my boyfriend off to that witch just so that you can get the better of her."

"I am just considering our options." Anita said. "But you have to admit it very well might work."

"Except for the fact that no one even knows where Callisto even is." Ciela said. "He's probably rallying the troops to strike back at sunrise."

"Are you worried about him?"

"Not at all." Ciela said promptly. "He's no fighter, but... well, he has this air about him. Like he can do anything he wants to. You know?"

Anita did not understand.

"You don't know him as well as I do." Ciela said. "He'll be just fine."

Anita considered Ciela's words carefully. She wondered if she was being genuine, or if she was just trying to convince herself that there was nothing for her to worry about. That everything would be just fine and that Callisto would be at waiting for her when everything was over and done with.

"Awoooooo!"

Rolf looked up. Some distance away, three shapes were making their way towards them.

"They're here!" He said triumphantly, as they padded up to him, all three of their noses pressed up against him, seemingly checking him for injuries. They whined a little bit. They seemed to know that something was wrong.

"You've all been busy, huh?" He asked, looking over at all of them. They all looked a little ragged and dirty and seemed a little worn out themselves.

"Have they been fighting too?" Ciela asked curiously, as she looked them over. "Are they alright?"

'No, they're fine.' Rolf assured her. "This has been a hard day for them."

"I can imagine." Ciela told him, bending over to take a better look at one of them. She realized that it was the sister... she had seen them often enough to make them out by their facial markings. "How are you doing, girl?" She asked. It gave her a loud, confident bark. She was doing well.

"Don't worry." Ciela said. "It'll be over soon."

She stood up. "Alright then." She said. "Let's go find Calanthe."

The girls nodded. Marionetta gave one last, longing look at Rolf.

"Are you... sure you're going to be okay?" She asked, her voice timid. "I mean..."

"I'll be fine." He told her. "I just need... a little bit more time to rest."

She nodded, not sure of what else to say. "Well... see you, then."

She turned and walked away. Ciela watched her leave. A part of why wanted to tell her to just spit it out already, but she held her tongue.

"Are you ready to go?" She asked Anita. She had probably been the one to take the biggest beating from Calanthe.

"I am fine." Anita said, as she floated off her chair, landing neatly on her feet. "That was nothing compared to what she did to me earlier today, I assure you."

"I can imagine." Anita was extraordinarily good at healing wounds, even her own. Being out of commission entirely for that length of time was a strong indication of just how badly beaten she was.

"And you, Selene?"

Selene tilted her head to the side. "Must you even ask?"

"Alright." Ciela said. "Marionetta, come on. Let's get going."

Marionetta nodded, her face set.

The girls set off back into the woods, following the next trail. "Which one is Calanthe's... do you think?" Anita asked. The two lights were heading off in different directions.

"It doesn't matter." Ciela answered. "We need to take out that other witch too, right? Either one will do."

"That is true." Anita acknowledged. "But I must confess... I am anxious to put down Calanthe once and for all."

"She easily overpowered us." Ciela admitted.

"Speak for yourself." Selene repeated sharply. "I had the situation under control."

"Is that why she kept knocking you around like a piñata?" Anita asked. "You sure did not look like you were winning to me."

"I took out several clones, far more than all of you combined..."

"Because of Marionetta distracting her!"

"Leave me out of this..." Marionetta muttered, looking embarrassed. "Please..."

"Ha!" Selene laughed, as she flipped her hair with her hand. "All according to plan."

Ciela gave Anita a look, which she promptly returned. Both of them were thinking the same thing. That Selene, although a more than capable fighter, was perhaps a little too confident in her own abilities.

They came to a stop. A few giant, wingless birds were pecking at something in the middle of the road. The adults were much bigger than they were, with long curved beaks and cruel looking eyes. Their children, or at least the young adults, were about half their size.

"Terror Birds." Anita murmured. "Careful. They attack and eat people."

One of the birds looked up at her as she spoke and glared at them.

"I don't think they're hungry, though." Anita said. "We should just go around."

They did that by cutting around the trees and passing them by entirely. None of them looked their way again.

"We were fortunate." Anita told them. "They are very quick."

Ciela wondered how Marionetta would handle an attack like that. Maybe having her tag along wasn't such a good idea after all. She could not, after all, directly control animals.

"They are also quite delicious." Selene said. "I hope they don't go anywhere once the fighting is done."

They left the birds pecking at their prey, and continued onward. The trail of light in the sky seemed to lead to a familiar location. "The bridge?"

"That's right." Ciela said. She sounded grim. If they ended up fighting on the bridge, the structure could be damaged. All that hard work would go down the drain, and the people would lose the Cerezan made goods they had been accustomed too.

"My book case still hasn't gotten here yet." Anita complained. "I will be very angry if Frideswide smashed the bridge."

Frideswide. The name seemed familiar to Ciela.

"The giant?"

"That's right." Anita said. "The fourth witch is the Almighty Frideswide, the last giant. The strongest woman in the world."

The bridge came into view. The moon shone down on the view in an eerie light, casting a large shadow across the valley below. There was a figure standing on the bridge above.

Selene sniffed the air. "Fish people are in the river below." She said. "Disgusting."

They came to the edge of the valley and looked down. As she said, plenty of fish people were careening around in the water, spilling the blood of an unlucky animal into the water. There were more of them than she had ever seen, and many more young (Who had not grown their humanoid limbs yet) and old (Who had white tufts of hair sticking out on their tails) than she had ever seen.

"Something must have driven them back downriver." Anita said. "Their young are taught not to swim out this way. Pretty much anything can eat them at that age."

"There's probably a lot worse things in there than just fish people, then." Ciela said. "Try not to fall."

They headed up the hill towards where the bridge crossed the valley. The trail of light illuminating the sky above. A figure was standing there on the completed bridge.

"That is not Calanthe." Anita murmured. "Too stocky."

Ciela agreed. This woman was a lot bulkier than Calanthe had been. So that meant that this was the other Witch... Frideswide.

She turned her head towards them and watched them as they approached, but did nothing. Ciela clenched her fist, leading the group up to her. The others followed.

"She is rather small... for a giant." Selene noted. "I was told true giants are over a thousand feet tall."

"This is not her true form." Anita whispered. "It is her Umbran power... to change her size at will."

Marionetta stiffened. She imagined the woman before them stomping on top of them with a foot the size of the bridge. The thought made her sick.

The group of girls stepped onto the bridge and stopped. "Hello there." Ciela called out. "Are you a member of the Black Sun?"

The woman did not answer. She merely turned away.

Ciela tried again. "Are you Frideswide?"

The woman stepped off the platform. Ciela expected her to take off and fly, but instead she fell, toward the river below.

"Hey, wait!"

She broke out into a sprint, leaving the others behind her.

"Ciela, wait, no!" Anita said sharply. "It's a trap!"

She looked back, surprise. All of a sudden, Anita and the others weren't there anymore. A large, black veil of darkness surrounded the Bridge and valley below in a thick fog.

She turned back to where Frideswide had fallen and found her floating there, staring intently at her.

"No!" Anita screamed from outside the barrier, as she tried to push through the blackness. It was not a solid substance; she could pass through it... but she pulled away just as quickly. An intense heat could be felt on the other side of the fog.

She winced as she nursed her burnt hand. "I completely forgot..." She murmured. "Frideswide refuses to fight groups of people. She only fights one on one.

"She split us up?" Selene asked. "Why would she do that?" She seemed very put out.

"It is a giant tradition." Anita told her. "They never fought wars with one another, instead they simply dueled, and the strongest always

got their way.

She focused back on the barrier and touched it. "And Frideswide holds true to that tradition."

"We can't let Ciela fight her on her own..." Marionetta said, horrified. Her face was extremely white. "All of us together couldn't handle Calanthe!"

"I'm not going to stand here and let Ciela have all the fun." Selene agreed. To Anita's horror, she broke out into a sprint and jumped into the barrier, allowing it to envelop her completely.

The two of them stared at the spot she had disappeared, and for a couple of moments there was silence. And then Selene came back out, looking none the worse for wear, holding yet another disembodied head.

"Is this her?" She asked bluntly, as she held it out in front of her.

Anita stared at it. It looked like it belonged to an overgrown lizard.

"Selene, where did you even get that?"

"Inside the barrier..." She said, as if it were obvious.

"And..." She shook her head. "No, do not go in there again." She said. "Please, let me try and break this thing myself."

Selene looked a little disappointed as she tossed the head aside, into the water below. "Fine." She said. "But hurry. I don't want Ciela to have all the fun."

The two fighters on the bridge, however, were thinking only of each other. Neither of them had spoken for several minutes.

"Well?" Ciela asked, breaking the silence. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Frideswide said nothing. She did not even move, or react in any way to show that she had heard.

"If you surrender now, I will let you live." Ciela said.

Frideswide raised her hand and clenched it tightly into a fist.

Ciela imitated the motion, positioning herself into a fighting position. "If that's how it's going to be." She said. "Don't say I didn't warn you!"

The stone under both of their feet shuddered from the sheer force at which they dashed at each other. Ciela punched forward, towards Frideswide's upper body, but her opponent grabbed her hand, and with a mighty twist, tried to throw her to the ground.

"Haaaa!"

Ciela spun around, bringing her other hand back to backhand her shoulder. She unleashed the God Hand, and the woman slid across the ground, around her, her heels digging into the ground, pushing back against her.

That wasn't a good shot, she thought, as she wrenched her hand out of her grip and kicked forward, several times over and over again, on her enemy's torso. She would need to be a bit more careful next time...

Frideswide stood there as each of her blows connected. Not a single one seemed to hurt her all that much. Ciela frowned, and put a little bit more magic into her leg with each strike. Enough to kill an ordinary person.

Immediately, Frideswide swatted it out of the way, sending her tumbling to the ground. She reached out with her hands before hitting the ground and spun around on them, twirling her legs above her head. She pulled her legs back, and kicked at Frideswide again, with both legs this time.

This time neither of them were messing around. Although each kick was bursting with magical energy, Frideswide knocked each of them away with a combination of simple martial arts and barrier magic, over and over again.

This wasn't going anywhere. Ciela thought as she pushed herself up, landing back on her feet. She would have to think of something else.

But before she could do anything, Frideswide was upon her, slapping a giant hand on top of her. Ciela punched upward, trying to break the hand itself, but to no avail. They clashed together in a mess of awesome power.

Ciela was barely aware that the hand had become bigger than she was. She cried as the fist closed around her arm, and flicked upward. Ciela cried out as she soared up above the battlefield, spinning too furiously to tell up from down.

She knew better than to use magic to right herself, though, because two long arms were extending from Frideswide, and her hands were growing and growing...

They clapped over her, and Ciela let out a cry as she pushed outright, pushing herself near her limits to stop the hands from crushing her outright. Her body screamed in agony, barely able to prevent the giant pair of hands from crushing her to death.

Then the fingers began to wrap around her, and she desperately tried to pry them off... but before she knew what was happening, she was thrown back downwards, back onto the bridge.

She slammed into the hard stone with incredible force. Blood spurted out mouth as she lay there in her little crater, under Frideswide's feet.

"Relax..." She tried to tell herself. "Just another day at the office..."

She spun around, trying to kick at Frideswide's leg, trying to trip her up, but Frideswide brought her leg down on it. She barely evaded it by rolling away from her, just out of her reach. She bent her back over, and then leapt back to her feet.

She wiped the blood from her face and got into a fighting stance again, this time a little bit more reluctantly. Frideswide, simply from watching her fight, had learned how to counter her God Hand, without knowing anything about it.

She took in a deep breath, wondering just how she would go about this one, as she tightened her fist. She practically relied on the God

Hand to overpower larger opponents. Having her trump card countered so easily made her feel extremely anxious. She would have to be more cautious.

Frideswide raised her hands as well. Despite her size, her movements were elegant and refined. She was not just a witch, but a master hand to hand fighter, with possibly decades of experience under her belt. Ciela gritted her teeth as she slowly inched forward.

Frideswide's kick caught her completely off guard. It was so fast she could hardly even react to it. It slammed into her stomach, causing her to keel over completely. Frideswide nearly adjusted herself and kicked again, towards Ciela's skull.

It felt like her head cracked open from the sheer force of the blow. She slammed into the ground with such force that she temporarily blacked out completely. She came to almost immediately afterwards, but by that point Frideswide had picked her up with a single hand, holding her over the side of the bridge.

Ciela struggled vainly, fighting and kicking and trying to bite whatever part of Frideswide she thought she could reach. But Frideswide, instead, simply punched her, again and again, all along her torso and stomach.

More blood came pouring out of her mouth as she took the blows. She struggled in vain, unable to use her power as Frideswide continued to beat her, each blow coming with no signs of slowing down.

She managed to slip her arm out from Frideswide's grip and jabbed forward blindly, desperate to hit something. Incredibly, her punch connected... right into Frideswide's cheek!

The giant stepped back, loosening her grip on Ciela further, who leapt from her hand to continue her attack. She hit the ground and bounced back up, her fists shooting towards her opponent, hitting her as fast and hard as she could.

Frideswide took several hits before she managed to recover, grabbing Ciela's hands with her own. Ciela grimaced as her hands were crushed by the sheer size and power of her opponent. She tried to pulled away, but Frideswide kneed her in the stomach. She winced in pain, but as Frideswide pulled back for another strike she quickly leapt up, lashing out her legs towards Frideswide's throat.

She bent down slightly, so that it hit her forehead instead. But the blow did not bother her at all. A magical barrier had been set between them, preventing her attack from making any real contact.

"Why, you..."

Ciela began kicking more furiously, all over her body, but before long she was thrown to the side. She rolled along the bridge, trying to get to her feet, but as she tried to find footing... there was nothing there!

She had slid to a stop right next to the side of the bridge. She scrambled to get away from it, but before she could even get her legs under her to raise herself up, Frideswide was there.

The blow sent Ciela tumbling over the edge of the bridge, and she fell, fell, fell... to the water below.

Ciela splashed into the water head first, and for a moment was swept away by the current. She saw fish people splashing into the water, making their way to her... she could do nothing to stop them...

But then water around her parted. She fell onto the river floor, gasping for breath and struggling to push herself up. The fish people swam around the edge of the bizarre bisection, clearly aware that powerful magic was at work here.

Frideswide descended onto the riverbed below. She fell slowly, like a balloon, and landed nearly on the ground before her.

She raised her arms again and stared intently at Ciela as she struggled to her feet, coughing violently. She copied the movement, staring back at her opponent with a determined, but wary gaze. She was not going to give up. Not now, and not ever.

The walls of water on either side of them were not particularly large. If she spread her arms out wide, she could practically touch them.

She was no magician, but she wasn't going to win a fist fight. She put her hands together and little bullets of water shot out from other side of Frideswide.

None of them even connected, or at least not the way they were supposed to. They all splashed harmlessly against her. Ciela was a little confused. Had she anticipated her attack quickly enough to block it? At that range and angle? How powerful was this woman?

Frideswide stepped toward her, and Ciela, despite her growing desire to back away, stepped forward as well, her hand raised. Perhaps a more defensive strategy would pay off, if her more aggressive attacks weren't doing any good. Maybe she could find some kind of weak spot... something she could take advantage of.

They stared at each other for several seconds, and Ciela began to wonder if she had been on to something when the attack came. She cried out as she tried to dodge the blows, but they came just too fast. She tried to duck and weave, but each punch caught her right where she wanted them to hit.

"Enough!"

Ciela grabbed hold of Frideswide, and threw her, around and upward!

She slammed through the wall of water, violently spun through it, and then broke out again, she slammed into the valley so hard that the rocks around them shook, but still she did not stop. She rolled upward due to the angle, and then back down again.

Alright! This was it!

Ciela leapt upward, leaving the area behind her, back to the bridge. But rather than jump on top it, she was aiming for the bottom. She spun around, mid jump, and landed on the bottom with her feet, her legs bent. And then, using the bridge as a springboard, she launched herself down towards Frideswide's body.

She was lying there, still. Maybe she was already out, but she couldn't chance it. Not after the beating she took. She screamed as she struck out her leg in a mighty jump kick straight at FrideSwide's chest!

The sheer force of the blow blew the surrounding rocks around them to dust. She covered her eyes and coughed violently. She pulled away, trying to clear her lungs, as she looked down at Frideswide's still body.

It was over. She had won.

She could hardly believe it. She had been beaten down so badly at first that she honestly didn't think she could hope to win. But somehow, she had done it.

She wanted to sit down, but she knew that she could not with all the fishpeople around. She needed... to get to higher ground. Back to the others...

And then there was laughter.

She stiffened, as she turned her head back down to Frideswide's body. Her eyes, which she had thought were the eyes of a dead woman, were looking straight at her.

Ciela flinched as Frideswide floated upward, back into a fighting position. She was smiling.

How... Ciela thought blankly, horrified. But she immediately realized that that did not matter. What did matter was that this fight was not over. She quickly got back into a fighting stance as Frideswide advanced towards her.

She was still quite some distance away when she attacked. Her arm extended from her body, elongating enough to reach Ciela from where she was standing. Ciela grunted, grabbing the hand with her fist before taking hold of it and trying to swing her around again.

This time, however, Frideswide was more than ready.

Before she could even get going, the arm shrunk, back to its owner, and she was dragged along with it, throwing herself off balance. Frideswide leapt forward and with a mighty blow, knocked her down with her other hand.

Ciela slammed into the rocks under her feet hard. She tried to get back up, but before she could Frideswide had raised her leg and brought it down onto her back.

She screamed as the bones there shattered. The pain was indescribable. She could suddenly not feel her legs at all. She could not even get them to twitch.

(That's it... I have no choice...)

No one was going to save her, or come to her aid, and she was on the verge of death. The best she could hope for was to take Frideswide with her.

She closed her eyes. The world around her began to disappear and become inconsequential. It did not matter what happened after this. All she needed was this one moment. She drew in the energy from the universe around her, binding it tightly into each fiber of her being.

Her legs, amazingly, started to move and she scrambled to her feet. Frideswide stared at her, her expression unreadable, as Ciela shot upward with a vicious uppercut.

Frideswide flew upward, up into the sky, and Ciela bent her legs, jumping up after her. The power within her still building, still building... still building!

(I'll only have one shot!)

Frideswide was growing larger and larger as they flew upward. Eventually her sheer size blocked out view of the sky. Good. An easier target.

Ciela screamed as she thrust out her fist as Frideswide descended, her hands outstretched. They reached out for her, but Ciela pushed

herself past her grip, right towards her face.

(It's over)

Frideswide went flying off into the distance, the stump of what remained of her head spraying blood all over the valley. The Fishpeople went wild as chunks of giant flesh fell into the valley below.

Ciela's body went limp, seizing up. The pain coursing through her body was beyond description. She could not even scream, her entire body felt like it was going to tear itself apart. She did not even feel or even notice the air pushing past her face as she fell to the ground, her hair whipping past her face. At least it would be over soon...

"No!"

As the barrier separating them vanished, Anita leapt forward, faster than even she thought possible to reach her. She stretched out her arms and let out a cry of pain as her caught Ciela in mid fall.

She knew better than to stop completely. Stopping too suddenly would possibly kill her. Instead she fell with her, wrapping her arms around her to slowly stop her descent.

Ciela was quivering in pain. She could not waste any time. She would have to start healing her immediately. Right here, on the rocks. Right next to a river full of Fish people...

She landed quickly, casting a desperate look around her at the water, before focusing her attention on Ciela. "You... What did you do...?" She muttered. "Why?"

Ciela could not even hear her. She was simply in too much agonizing pain.

Anita couldn't make the pain go away, and it would be unwise to even try. Ciela had pushed her body to the absolute limits to deal that one attack, and she did that by harnessing more magic than any one person could handle. For a normal person, it would simply

tear them apart, but as Ciela had created her own martial art around taking in magical energy and using it to give her body impossible strength... she had managed to even overpower the mighty Frideswide, if only for a moment.

The most Anita could do for her was make sure she stayed alive as the worst of it passed. She would have to make sure her body did not tear itself apart and she kept breathing. Any number of things could happen at this stage... her heart could explode, could bite her tongue and choke on her own blood, she could have an aneurysm...

She barely noticed the fish person flop up on the shore next to her and crawl over to her, its teeth bared. She raised her hand and shot it between the eyes. It reeled, flopping back into the water spreading blood every which way. Its brothers, cannibalistic in nature, immediately set to work on it.

"Are you going to move her, or what?"

She looked up to find Selene standing over them. Her hair was waving above her in that strange, tentacle like fashion.

"I do not want her moved just yet." Anita told her. "Putting unnecessary stress on her at this stage may kill her."

She was trying to keep calm and professional, but inwardly she was panicking. If Selene decided to go off on her own again to fight Calanthe, she would be left alone here with no one other than Marionetta to rely on. She would not be able to focus on taking care of Ciela while protecting them all from danger. Selene, as much as she hated to admit it, was their only option.

"I see." Selene said slowly, as she stepped past them, towards the water. Her bare feet stepped into the river as it flowed past. "It would be a shame if she died..."

A shame? Anita could hardly think of anything worse that could possibly happen. "A shame?" She repeated shrilly. "This is a bit more serious than that!"

She was deeply offended by Selene's lax attitude. There was no sign of compassion, empathy, or interest in what she was talking about. Selene simply did not care.

"I never said it wasn't." Selene said. "I would deeply regret if she died before I had the chance to fight her myself."

Anita froze. Her eyes wide. "W-what?" She positioned herself protectively over Ciela's body.

"I'm very interested in seeing how I would defeat someone with her skill." Selene said. The fish people were devouring the remains of the one Anita had killed, but none seemed anxious to venture back onto the shore. "Today... Has been the best day of my life."

Anita stared at her blankly, not sure what to make of her.

"Is this really how ordinary people live?" Selene asked her. "Fighting creatures this powerful, every few weeks... I admit, I had no idea there were so many strong people out there...."

This woman was rambling. Anita thought. She was just talking to herself at this point. She could not understand anything she was saying.

"Bears the size of boulders, fish people who are learned enough to use powerful magic, women with Godlike strength... This is all so... exciting."

Exciting?

"Have you never been away from the city?" Anita asked her. "There is plenty of... excitement... out of the city walls."

"Several times." Selene answered. "But always quickly... always for a single, solitary target that never puts up much of a fight. This... this is where I want to be... Who I want to be..."

She fell silent for a moment. And simply stood there.

Anita stared at her for a moment, before turning her attention back to Ciela. Selene was more than just odd. She was completely insane.

...

Demi peered over the side of the window fearfully, trying to subtly assess the situation outside. She ducked back down almost immediately as a large rock shattered the glass.

"Sorry, Mother!" She called. "Just... I just tripped!"

Another rock came through the window. There was no glass to stop it this time, so it went flying by into the kitchen, knocking over the kettle of tea boiling on the stove, sending boiling hot tea spilling all over the counter and floor.

"No!" She wailed, holding her hands on her head. Mother hadn't had her tea yet today... She would have to prepare another pot... Putting herself right within range of the impish creatures right outside her window. Oh, why, why was this happening NOW?

The bell rang.

She froze, panicking even more. Oh, what did she want now? She stood up straight, smoothing up her hair as she tried to look more relaxed than she felt. Another rock flew into the room, and she ducked again.

She crawled along the floor, deeper into the house, and made sure to avoid the stairs by the back door... something had been pounding on it for fifteen minutes. She feared whatever it was would knock it down eventually. She took the other staircase instead.

Their home was quite the old, beautiful house, and it distressed her to see how nearly every window was broken, how spears had been lodged into the sides and how the creatures were just not going away.

She came to the biggest, grandest door in the house, The 'White Door' as the rare visitors called it, due its striking pure white paint that was in stark contrast to the rest of the rather dimly lit house. Mother's room.

She reached for the beautiful white Swan doorknob and knocked it.

"I didn't say you could enter."

Demi froze, halfway through with opening the door. "... I'm sorry, Mother." She said.

"Have they gone?"

Demi shook her head, before realizing that her Mother had not even turned to face her. Despite the situation, she was turned away from the door, towards that stained-glass window she loved so much.

"I... no, I can't seem to get rid of them."

Her mother said nothing. Demi knew that she wasn't happy.

"They're not human, Mother." She said. "They are monsters, and I- "

"Are you disobeying your own Mother?"

The tone was sharp.

"No, I'm not disobeying, I just- "

"Then get it done."

Something crashed downstairs. Something was scurrying along down there. With one last reproachful look towards her mother, she shut the door.

Not even an apology... Demi thought, as she descended the stairs again. Mother had been in such a good mood lately, too... why did this have to happen now?

She peered over the railing on the stairs, trying to find whatever had caused the racket earlier. Something had torn through the window curtains. They were nothing but rags hanging in there now.

What had entered the house, exactly?

"Hello?" Demi called out, descending the stairs. "Um, if you understand English... please leave. Mother wants you gone."

She stepped in some liquid and slipped. She cried out, reaching for the railing to steady herself. She stared down at her shoe. It wasn't water... it seemed like some kind of spit.

"Ew, gross!"

She shook it a little, trying to get it off without having to touch it, but it seemed to be kind of sticky. It wasn't coming off.

"These were brand new, too..." She lamented. She slipped off her shoes and discarded them in the corner. She would have to clean them later, after the problem was dealt with.

"Ssssss...."

"Hm?"

She looked up, to where the sound was coming from. "Is someone there?"

The sound was coming from some distance away, from another room. She strode across the hall, careful to avoid any broken glass, and entered the living room.

The thing turned to face her, its slanted eyes glinting dangerously. In its curved hand was a long, sharp, scimitar that was as big as she was. It seemed to be a Lizard... but also like a person. A Lizard man, she thought.

"Oh, there you are." Demi said. "Um, if you don't mind, this is our house. So if you would be so kind... please leave."

She smiled, hoping she was charming enough to convince it to go. It cocked its head to the side as it stared at her, as if considering her words. It then scurried up to her and waved its sword.

She didn't even flinch. She just stared at it as it raised its weapon. "Do you not know where the door is?" She asked. "It's a big house... I get lost myself, sometimes." She laughed.

A thought struck her. Perhaps it didn't speak English!

"This way!" She said, as she turned around and strode off. The Lizard, confused, watched her go.

She turned around, frowning at it. "Do you want out of here or not?" She asked. "You can't stay here." The Lizard quickly scuttled after

her as she reached the door. "Out you go." She said as she opened the door. As soon as she did, more creatures barged in, pushing past her and entering the house. "Oh, darn."

Several of the tiny little imps that stood at about knee height bounced into the room. Several dashed into the kitchen, throwing things about everywhere, messing with the tablecloth, smashing plates, and throwing over the tea kettle... AGAIN.

Another jumped straight at the Lizard man's head. It snapped at it as it bounced away, giggling. It chased it back into the living room, swinging its sword around wildly, trying to hack it into pieces.

Demi stared, not quite sure how to go about with her task. "Guys..." She said. "Please... Mother's going to kill me..."

The imps did not seem to listen or care. One threw upon the cupboard and began tossing plates like frisbees. Each plate smashed to pieces as it slammed into tables, walls, and furniture.

"No!" Demi cried, waving her arms in front of her. "Those are Mother's favorite!"

The imp ignored her protests. Instead it reached deeper inside the cupboard and wrapped its little hands around all the plates. With a mighty heave, I pulled them out, sending them flying to the ground.

"N-no!"

The bell rang again, but she had no choice but to ignore it. Mother would have to wait, she needed to get these things out NOW.

She crept forward behind the creature, trying hard not to startle as it rummaged through their cupboard. She tried not to wince as the plates hit the ground. The cracking noise hurt her ears. It was only a few feet away, now...

"Gotcha!"

She leapt forward, but the thing slipped in between her fingertips. Its skin was much slicker and harder to hold onto than she had originally thought it would be. It leapt up, up onto the ceiling above,

and lowered its head backwards to stare at her. It stuck out its tongue and began to crawl away. "No!" She cried as it scurried out of sight. "You need to go..."

It did not even look back at her. She wanted to pull her own hair out. What was she supposed to do?

She needed help. Someone from the government or the Sons of the Sun or SOMEONE needed to come by and help. Someone who knew what they were doing...

Who around here could... or would be willing... to help? They had no neighbors, and she had no means to leave. And of course, even if she could leave to find someone to help, she would be leaving her Mother alone when she had asked her to do something for her. That would not end well... not at all.

Her hands were tied, and she wasn't sure what she could do to fix the problem. Mother was counting on her to drive these things from the house, and she couldn't manage it. Maybe she should just lock herself in the Swan Room with her mother and wait for someone to drop by... Surely a soldier or something would drop by eventually to check up on them.

Surely Mother would understand...

She carefully crept her way back the stairs, trying to avoid detection by anything sinister lurking in the house.

"Hello?"

Surprised, she turned around. Someone was standing at the door. She smiled warmly. "Oh... thank goodness." She said. "Um, can you help me?"

The woman smiled as she stepped inside. "If you return the favor, sure." She wrinkled her nose as she looked around. "What a mess."

The woman was tall and thin and had lovely bright red ears sticking out of her head. Demi wasn't quite sure what to make of her. She was quite unlike any other person she had ever seen.

"Um, what do you need help with, exactly?" Demi asked, suddenly timid. Mother had given her strict instructions to never give away any of their possessions, even if asked.

"A silly, little thing." The woman told her, smiling warmly. "You see, I'm getting married today, and I've only just realized... I don't have a cake!"

Demi gasped, putting her hand to her mouth in horror. "Oh no... and congratulations!"

"I appreciate your concern for the situation." The woman told her. "Do you have anything to make a cake with?"

"I'm sure I can find something." Demi said. "Uh, but about my problem..."

The Lizard man was standing right there in the doorway, staring at them both apprehensively.

"Ah, I see." The woman said. "Those little things are bothering you, are they?"

She pushed past Demi and stepped further into the house. "Well, if they're going to try and stop me from getting our cake ready, I suppose I have to get rid of them."

The lizard man snarled, raising its sword. It didn't even know it was already dead.

"Now." The woman said, turning away from the beast's body. "Can you get the ingredients ready while I clean out this house?"

"Y-yes..."

The woman turned around and began to walk further into the house.

"Wait!"

She turned around. Demi flushed a bit, but she had to know something. "There's a room upstairs with a pure white door." She said. "You must not go in there under any circumstances." She

wondered if she was being rude. "And, Ummm.... I didn't catch your name...?"

"I am Calanthe." She said. "And you.... Who are you?"

"I am Demi." She said. "I live here."

"I would never have guessed."

She turned and disappeared.

What incredible luck. Demi thought brightly as she turned back to the kitchen. Crashes and shrieks of pain echoed throughout the house, and although she was a bit worried that Mother would be cross about it, at the moment she was just relieved that the immediate problem was being dealt with.

All she needed to do now was make the nice lady her cake.

She had never even seen a wedding cake in person before, let alone made one, but she had several fancy magazines from the city that showed pictures of them. After a brief trip to her room to fetch it, she was annoyed to find that they were no help. An advertisement for the bakery on Main Street (Made for Royalty, enjoyed by all) a brief article highlighting the marriage between the globe trotter (And heart throb) Dr. Bell and a woman named Vincentia... a dark-haired woman with a dour expression. Neither looked particularly happy in either of their photos. The article suggested that something had gone wrong at the wedding.

There were other articles, too, but none were recipes... instructions on how to make the cake. Maybe Calanthe could just go to the bakery on Main Street... it certainly seemed like the best option. But the City was just so far away...

She took the magazine with her favorite ad, the one with the young couple dancing in front the cake, and took it with her back to the kitchen. Calanthe was waiting for her, looking impatient.

"What took you so long?" She asked. "What were you doing?"

She raised the magazine and showed it to her. "Um, I couldn't find a recipe, but this says that there's a really good bakery in the city..."

"No, that's no good." Calanthe said. "I'm not going there."

"Why not? Is it too far away?"

Calanthe laughed humorlessly. "Not for me, no. I simply am not welcome there, sweetie."

"Oh... Why not?"

Calanthe smirked. "Well, I have a lot of enemies there." She said. "It's simply not all that fun for me."

Enemies? In the capital? Why? She was reminded of Ciela and how she had been falsely imprisoned because of the conflict there. Could things there be so terrible that it was impossible to walk into a shop and buy a cake?

"Besides." Calanthe said, as she peered at the cake. "I want my cake to be something I make for myself. Something grand, magical, beautiful..."

"Like you?"

Calanthe looked at her, surprised at the compliment. "Yes, exactly! Something that suits me... and my new husband!"

She seemed very pleased with herself, despite the lack of progress she had made. "I do like the cake, though." She said, after a pause. "I just wish I knew how to make it."

"I'm not allowed to make sweets." Demi said. "Mother thinks they're fattening..."

"You have an oven, though." Calanthe observed. "Where do you keep your pots and pans?"

Demi looked at the open cupboard at her feet. Where did they go?

It seemed that something had thrown it across the room, because they found them laying some distance away. "Bah." Calanthe scoffed. "Those imps really did a number on your house..."

Demi jumped as a fountain of water burst from the faucet in the sink. The Dish soap on the counter, which had thankfully been untouched, uncapped itself and poured into the sink.

The pots and pans and plates, everything that had been thrown around, began setting themselves back to where they had been. Demi watched, awed as the pieces to each of their plates forced themselves back together, melding together as if they were never broken. The plates that touched the ground ran through the sink and began to wash themselves, scrubbing all the dirt and germs away in quick succession.

"Wow." Demi breathed, awed. "I wish I could do that..."

"Do you have no magic of your own, sweetie?"

"No..." Demi answered sadly. "It would certainly help with chores."

Calanthe laughed. "Oh, you won't have to worry about your chores." She said. "Soon, every person in the world will have powerful magical abilities."

"Really?"

Calanthe smiled. "Really."

"Wow!" Demi could hardly believe it. She remembered how she used to pretend to be a witch when she was younger. Mother never liked it. Demi always tried following her around everywhere, spouting gibberish to try and make her smile. It never worked, of course, and she always got scolded for it.

You will be much more than a witch, Demi.

"So you're saying I will have... real magical powers?"

Calanthe was still smiling, but she did not answer. Demi took that to mean that yes, she would someday be able to fly and fight monsters and do her dishes without touching them. Ciela would be so impressed with her.

"Enough talk about the future." Calanthe said. "How about that cake?"

The dishes cleaned, they focused their efforts on setting up the cake from scratch. They dug around a bit through the food they did have, trying to find some sugar.

"Does your Mother not buy any sugar at all?" Calanthe asked, frustrated.

Surprisingly, they found a bag sitting in the back of a cupboard. It was unopened.

"Has it expired?" Calanthe asked her, checking the bag for tags.

"I don't think so..."

Calanthe popped open the bag and looked in it. "It looks fine to me." She said. The bag floated out of her hands and to the pan. "Now... I don't think we have any frosting, but I suppose I can go fetch some while it's baking."

The bag must have been here for years, before they started living alone. Could her father have left it there?

She looked absolutely elated. Getting married must be a wonderful thing indeed. Calanthe sorted through the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of eggs. "Alright." She said. "Wow, I haven't made a cake since I was a little girl.... I forgot how much fun it was!"

They managed to find all the necessary ingredients scattered across the kitchen and managed to get things going. Their oven had not been used in a while, so Demi suggested they clean it as well. Calanthe did so in record time. It practically seemed to be cleaning itself.

"So where are you getting married?" Demi asked her, as she slid the cake into the oven. It would not be ready for some time to come.

"I... don't know." Calanthe admitted, leaning against the counter top. "This has all been kind of sudden..."

"Sudden?" Demi repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." She raised her hand to her head brushed aside her bangs. "When I met him I thought he was just like any other guy, you

know? The sort of person who would run the other way when he learned that I'm... uh, well, that I don't exactly have the most innocent past."

Demi didn't understand, but Calanthe did not seem to be done talking. After a brief pause, she got back into it.

"But he was different." She said. "He really made me feel as if... I could be an ordinary woman." She fell quiet for a minute there.

"Ordinary?" Demi repeated. She found that strange. Mother, whenever she chose to speak to her, always reminded her that being merely ordinary meant that you would never be extraordinary. Why would this woman want to be like everyone else?

She was reminded suddenly, of all people, Marionetta. A girl who used misused her powers to become accepted by the people around her. To become ordinary. And she was miserable because of it. It wasn't until Ciela entered her life that Marionetta grew to accept that she was different. That she was special.

Demi wished she was like that. She wished she could do something impressive or interesting like that. For Mother's sake...

"Well, I'll never be truly ordinary." Calanthe laughed, as ear twitched. "I just want someone to come home to sometimes... you know?"

Demi knew the feeling all too well. "I think I do." She said. The conversation lulled for a couple of minutes.

And then someone knocked on the door.

Calanthe froze. Demi, not at all worried, gave her a strange look. "Are you alright?" She asked. "Is something wrong?"

Calanthe looked very worried indeed. "I did not hear anyone coming..." She said. "It's a good thing they knocked, or- "

The door opened.

"I hope you don't mind if I let myself in, Miss."

Calanthe's ears pulled back, folding over themselves. She snarled at the newcomer, who looked very familiar to Demi....

"Did the girls let you get away?" He asked, looking amused. "The way they've been going I thought they were going to do our job for us."

He closed the door behind him and Demi caught sight of a very well dressed man striding into the kitchen. His long dark hair was combed back.

"Ah, hello Demi." He said, sounding a little surprised as he caught sight of her. "I... I'm surprised you're here, to be honest."

He smiled. "She's not the type of person you want to spend time around." He said.

"Who are you?" Calanthe demanded. Her voice suddenly raspy and dangerous. "What are you- "

"Hey, Demi." The man said, interrupting her. "Can you get me something to drink, please?"

"O-oh... Um..."

She looked between the two people in front of her, who were staring at each other intently. Calanthe looked furious and even a little afraid. But the man seemed laid back, cool, and collected.

"What would you like?" Demi asked politely.

"Some tea sounds great." He told her. "Ah, make some for Calanthe too, won't you?"

Demi nodded. Her mouth dry. She did not want to question the man, but she did not like the looks the two were giving each other.

"Tea?" Calanthe repeated, sounding almost scandalized. "You want to have... tea with me?"

"Why not?" He asked, shaking his head. "I am willing to let bygones be bygones. My Master isn't going to hold this... event... against you. You will be free to go, if you choose to surrender now."

"Surrender?" Calanthe repeated, laughing a little. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you have already lost."

Demi had her back turned. She was busy working with the tea, but the awkward silence behind her made her feel incredibly nervous.

"Lost?" Calanthe repeated. "Lost what? The summoning is nearly complete and- "

"Your Master will not live through the day." He said. "Our chosen warrior is already on his way to end this, once and for all."

Calanthe's lip curled. "The barrier between our Master and the world around her still stands. Frideswide and myself will not go down so- "

"Frideswide has been killed." The man interrupted her. Calanthe's eyes widened. "It was a great fight too." He said conversationally. "Ciela really had her work cut out for her."

Demi's hand froze. Ciela... Ciela had... killed someone?

"Ciela?" Calanthe repeated, disbelievingly. "Frideswide let herself be beaten by a... little girl?"

"Ciela is a wonderful woman." He said. His previous demeanor suddenly became very cold. "I won't have you speaking badly of her."

Demi looked back at him, realization dawning on her. She had seen him before... at school, hanging around Ciela and Marionetta. This was Callisto. Ciela's boyfriend.

"What, are you in love with her something?" Calanthe asked, glaring daggers at him.

He smiled, but did not answer. "Even I didn't expect her to do so well. I'm told she put up a fight against you and Charlotte, and outright defeated Frideswide... on her own terms, no less." He shook his head. "I would have liked to see her beat you too." He said. "But I suppose I'm going to have to do it for her."

Calanthe took a step back. "You wouldn't." She said. "You... Your kind can't touch me."

"The Master was very clear." He said lazily, as he stepped toward her. "The Black Sun will bring ruin to us all..."

It happened before she even realized what was happening. The teapot she was tending to suddenly lurched out of her grip. The cap burst out sending boiling hot tea spilling towards Callisto.

And then he wasn't there anymore. The water splashed harmlessly against the wall and carpet. The entire process had taken less than a second.

"Where are you, Dracula?" Calanthe shouted, her voice hoarse. "Show yourself!"

There was no answer.

Calanthe looked back at Demi, and an evil glint appeared in her eyes. Demi yelped as she was dragged over to her by the hair. She slid over the counter and towards Calanthe's side.

A knife was pressed against her throat. "Do you see this, Dracula?" She asked. "If I die.... The girl dies too!"

Demi did not understand what was going on. Tears were pouring out of her face. Why.... Why was Calanthe, the sweet lady who helped her out around the house, doing this to her?

"Touch her... and you will regret it." Calisto's voice rang out everywhere, all around them. Calanthe grinned. He could do nothing while she was still alive.

The girl whimpered underneath her, clearly in deep pain. "Hush, sweetie." Calanthe told her. "I'm not going to be able to enjoy this cake unless I get out of here."

She was starting to calm down now. The Dracula had done nothing besides reveal its presence. She would have to trick it, somehow... She would have to make as many clones as she could and make a beeline for it.

Nine Calanthes all making a run for it... he wouldn't be able to make a move on her then.

She looked down at Demi. The girl had been very nice. It would be a shame to let such a weak, defenseless girl burn in the new world. Killing her now would be a kindness.

She would do it now, and then bolt. If she were lucky, Callisto would rush to her side and try to save her, if she just killed here and now. An intense burst of electricity burst from her fingertips, intent on stopping Demi's heart where she stood.

Calanthe was dead before she knew it.

...

Anita, Selene, and Marionetta had all worked together to drag Ciela out of the valley, as gently as they could. She was still in deep pain, and Anita dared not pull away from her for even an instant. She had had Marionetta carefully pull Ciela up the side of the cliff, with her floating by her side all the while. Selene had stayed behind, at first, to fight the remaining fish people. But after a while, they all fled further downstream and she returned to them, looking extremely disappointed.

"I have had enough of fishpeople." She said in a matter of fact sort of way. "Monoa was the pinnacle of their kind. I should not be wasting my time with small fry."

She didn't even ask how Ciela was doing. Anita thought irritably. Just who did this girl think she was?

Marionetta had been a very big help, in comparison. She sat upright on her knees as she watched Anita work. Occasionally, very occasionally... she would ask questions about what she was doing.

Anita answered only briefly. She tried not to be too brusque with her, but she simply could not afford to be distracted at this critical stage. Ciela, following her incredible attack, now needed to be looked after rigorously. But she much preferred Marionetta's quiet interest to Selene's Devil May Care attitude.

"Is she... going to be alright?" Marionetta asked timidly. She had not asked the question since they had set her down.

Anita could not meet her eye. "I am... unsure." She said. "She pushed herself too hard."

There could be any manner of developments that could kill her in a matter of seconds. She could not let herself be distracted, by anything.

"So there is one more witch to go." Selene said. "Calanthe."

Anita nodded, her hands shaking a little. "That degenerate... we're going to need a real strategy if we're going to beat her." She said. "Marionetta, you had the right idea. Perhaps we can recruit someone we can use as bait and- "

Marionetta was not listening to her. She was looking up at the sky, open mouthed.

She panicked. Anita stood up, raising her hand to the sky, expecting to see the summoned creature in all its horror standing before them. But there was nothing there.

For a moment, she was confused. She had expected to see whatever it was that the Black Sun was trying to call here. But there was nothing. Nothing but the sky.

Then what was Marionetta staring at, then?

"The lights..." Marionetta said. "They're all gone!"

"What?"

They were indeed. She had not noticed it at first because there were times that they could not see all four trails of light around the colony, but they had seen Calanthe's trail as they approached Frideswide. She was sure of it.

"The barrier has been lowered." She said, amazed. "Someone... Someone killed Calanthe for us!"

Had the Rose Witches rallied and managed to corner their most despised member? Had Calanthe finally been made to pay for their crimes?

Ciela cried out in pain. For a moment there, she had forgotten all about her. Panic overtook her as she kneeled back down and continued tending to her wounds. That moment of confusion was all it took for her situation to worsen. She would have been long dead if she had been left alone down there...

"Hang in there, Ciela..." She murmured. Whoever had killed Calanthe must be incredibly powerful indeed. If it were a Witch sent to destroy her, she hoped that they would heed her advice and destroy the leader as well.

If they did not understand the gravity of the situation. If they chose to let the humans to their own devices... something horrible would happen.

Their world would come to an end.

...

The witch did not even seem to notice that the barrier had been lowered. She had been standing in the same spot for as long as he had been waiting, her arms spread wide, chanting rigorously. The summon circle around her was glowing with a faint, yet somehow sinister, light.

This had to end now.

He approached her, heavy footsteps thudding against the ground. His golden plated armor, despite the still dark sky, glowed a bright yellow. She lowered her long, thin arms, but did not turn to face him. She was aware he was there after all.

"You are far too late, human." The witch said. Her voice was raspy and sinister. "Your World is no more."

"Is that so?" Solaire asked, as he tightened his grip around his sword. "To me it looks the same it always has."

She turned around. Her bald head was a bit unsightly for a woman, and her pale skin, long claw like hands, and slitted eyes did nothing to make her more attractive to his eye.

"Your land and everything in it will be nothing but ash."

She raised a long finger at him. "And you will be the first to die by my hand."

"Nine Morana..." She stiffened as he used her full name. "I will give you one chance to repent for what you have done. Otherwise I will strike you down where you stand."

"Brave words, for a mere mortal." Morana murmured, as her cloak began to billow out from under her. Suddenly, she rose upward, her cloak still trailing against the ground. She looked nearly ten feet tall. She bent over suddenly, her face pressing up against his. "You would dare challenge me?" She asked. "You are certainly courageous..."

He swiped at her with his blade. She drifted to the left. Instead of cutting her open, he simply cut through the long dark ropes instead.

She drifted around him in a circle, several times, staring at him with an almost bored expression. Her robe regrew new fabrics almost immediately. "You and your men may have felled my followers... but I will not fall to you so easily."

Solaire raised his shield, wondering just what this woman was trying to do. She was not attacking, simply circling him. Again and again. She was an ugly woman, Solaire thought every time her face came into view. He never realized how much he appreciated women having hair...

And then he looked down.

Demonic hands were grabbing hold of his legs from all directions. He struggled as they clawed at him from their portal in the ground, trying to drag him inside.

His armor suddenly began to glow much more brilliantly, and the hands shirked away, unwilling to touch him.

She stopped circling him, frowning. "You are no ordinary human." She said at last. "An Umbra..."

Solaire smiled. "I am." He said. "But there is more to me than just that."

He swung the sword again, trying to catch her across the face, but she jolted back, incredible quickly, and rose again. She spread her hands in front of her, each finger pointing in different directions. Eight powerful beams of blue light burst from her, destroying trees and burning through foliage. She closed her hand, and the beams slid towards Solaire from eight different angles.

He stood tall as the beams connected with him. Several bright flashes of light emanated from the armor, forcing Morana to look away briefly.

Before she knew it, Solaire was upon her, raising the sword above his head, prepared to strike.

She snarled in surprise. The beams did not seem to wound him at all. She had no choice but to slap her clawed hands together, catching the blade mid swing.

Solaire swung around with his shield, trying to smack her with it, but her rope flared upward, wrapping around his arm. He flinched in surprise as its grip tightened, preventing him from moving. He stared at it, and an invisible sword cut it to ribbons, freeing him.

But the moment of distraction was all Morana needed. Mustering up her magical energy the sword began to heat up, incredibly quickly. So quickly, in fact, that a couple of seconds were all it took for it to become a gooey melted mess.

Solaire brought down his other arm, bludgeoning her with his shield, but she evaded it, smiling all the while. "A man without his weapon is nothing at all." She said.

Solaire tossed the hilt away in disgust as he brandished his shield. "One broken part doesn't ruin the machine." He said. "Observe."

He raised his shield. The gemstone embedded on it glimmered with a strange golden light.

When he lowered the shield, his face was obscured by a bright gold helmet that obscured his face. And in his hand was another sword.

Moran narrowed her eyes. Conjuring actual goods out of thin air was impossible for humans. "Who are you?"

Solaire did not answer her. The new sword in his hand was different than the last. Instead of the thick, heavy blade this one was much thinner and lightweight.

He brandished it in front of him, giving it several practice swings before readying himself. He stood with a completely different poise, now. He was going to change his tactics.

Morana was still not completely sure as to what this man was capable of. The others had all been killed by something, so it would best to be cautious. She still had a feeling that this man was indeed very dangerous.

"No matter how many swords you hold, you cannot hope to best me." She said. She smiled, her sharp teeth gleaming.

He attacked, stabbing forward with his sword with incredible speed. Morana floated backwards, dodging stabs from the sword.

"Is that all?" She asked, a little surprised at how simplistic his attack had been. "You are- "

She stopped and looked down at her body. A stab wound was protruding from her chest.

"How..." She had not even felt it. She quickly pushed her body to heal. It did, and quickly. She looked up at Solaire, who had raised his sword upward, across his face. He was staring intently at her.

He had scratched her, but had not killed her. How? Why? Could he be showing her mercy...

No, of course not. This man was fighting to kill. He could not possibly hope to overpower her.

"You are weak." She said. "Even if you could kill me, you would soon be faced with a horror beyond your understanding."

Solaire laughed. "I can imagine some pretty terrible things." He said. "You shouldn't underestimate my imagination."

"A man who does nothing but talk... how pathetic."

The ground beneath their feet glowed with a terrible red energy. Relief flowed through her. "You are too late, Hero." She said. "The summoning is now complete. It is only a matter of time now until..."

The ground under their feet shook. She laughed, throwing her head back. "It is over, mortal!" She screamed, as the trees around them began to shake violently, their leaves curling up and disintegrating into dust.

Solaire could not believe his eyes. This creature, whatever it was, was so powerful that its very presence could kill the life around it. A monster in every sense of the word. And it had not even entered this realm yet.

"It is only a matter of time." Morana said, spreading her arms wide, a large smile on her face. "The world will be burned to ashes, and a new one will rise in its place. The Dracula will fall without your kind sustaining their existence."

"You vastly underestimate humanity." Solaire said. "The things we can build, the people I lead, the future we want for ourselves... we simply won't let you win."

Behind her, the first rays of the sun peeked out over the horizon. The night had ended.

His armor began to glow with a faint yellow light. The energy from the sun was flowing through it now. He would no longer have to conserve his energy. He would no longer have to hold back.

"Let us win?" Morana asked, amused. "Human, you have already lost."

As she spoke the ground began to shake again. The ground under them shifted, back and forth, as if something was underground. Something alive, and something colossal.

"You and your men have fought valiantly." She said. "If you so desire, I will be more than happy to appoint you to a place of importance in the New World." She held her hand forward, in a sort of welcoming gesture. "Those among your ranks who felled my followers also deserve a place."

Solaire brandished his sword. There was no hesitation, no doubt in his stance. Morana pulled her hand away.

"Very well." She said. "You have chosen your own fate."

She floated up and away, off into the sky. Solaire watched her go for a moment, and then followed.

They rose above the trees and into the sky above. Morana stopped and waited for him to catch up to her.

When he was at eye level, she gestured down below her. "I am sure you are wondering at just where my master is." She said. "Observe."

He did so. Initially, all he saw were trees, land, building, and rocks. And then it shifted, unnaturally.

"This was not a traditional summoning in any sense." Morana said. "Our Master has no physical form of his own, and requires much time and care for mere mortals to even be aware of him... let alone help him take on a physical form."

This woman was crazy. Solaire thought. There was nothing here. She spoke as if the creature was already there, among them, but nothing had come through the summoning circle.

The ground shifted again. Little ridges began to appear out of the ground, creating large inclines of land that were not there before. The trees, which by this point had withered and died almost completely, twisted and writhed around each other.

The ground underneath shook again. Confused, he looked in. The way things were going he imagined a great monster pushing itself out of the ground... but that did not seem to be the case.

"You told me that you came here to protect your land." Morana said. "But now the very land itself is against you..."

Realization dawn on him. Horrified, he turned back to her. "You... had this thing's spirit possess the very Earth itself?"

"That is correct." The Witch said, preening. "The people all over the world are feeling the shakes and tremors of change, even if they do not understand what it means for them. The White Witch, your city of Cereza, the Dracula, Oberon, the Bears of Blue River, the beings of the Abyss... each and every thing living on this planet will suffer, die, and be forced to change. This era of weakness, of desiring peace and unity, will fall to the natural order of things. Where the strong live, and the weak perish."

She had not lost her smile at all. She went on, becoming more and more enthusiastic as she spoke. "Your city of Cereza collapsed among itself because of the loss of your Queen." She said. "Your leaders suddenly had no direction, and in a bid of power, forced their loyal followers to fight amongst themselves, all while they sit back in their manors and eat biscuits."

She was looking at him in a way that showed her conviction in her beliefs, and her knowledge that Solaire agreed wholeheartedly. "You led this Colony, forming it from a band of nothing more than outcast soldiers and people who could not make a living in Cereza and made something out of it. You made it a powerhouse of a society, with a number of powerful fighters and creatures living here."

She let that hang in the air for a moment, before speaking again.

"And yet you have already made the worst mistake you could possibly make." She said. "You fail to grasp that your society cannot sustain itself without you. This society is doing nothing but holding you back."

She reached her hand out again towards him. "If you were to abandon them and focus on improving your powers... you would become more powerful than you could possibly imagine."

Solaire swung his sword, his gaze never wavering from hers. "I will never abandon my people." He said, his tone harsh. "They are strong... stronger than you, by far. What you promise is nothing compared to what I see them accomplish every day, by living here among them."

He pointed the sword at her. "Your failure to understand that there is more in this world than pure power will be your undoing." He said. "I will strike you down, and your master too if I must."

"I acknowledge your strength." Morana said slowly. "It is a shame this had to end this way. A world full of men and women like you would be wonderful indeed..."

She adjusted her hand so that a single finger was pointing at him.

Solaire gagged. His hand went to his throat and he could feel something constricting it. He could not breathe. Somehow she had gotten past his armor and cast a spell on him directly.

But for him, dispelling the curse was trivial. He did so immediately and leaned forward, his shield brandished in front of him. He flew forward, at her, ramming her with the shield.

She lurched to the side, but he was just as quick. He whirled in midair, performing a circular slash with his sword. She snarled, raising her hand again. The sword shattered completely as it encountered it.

But this time, Solaire was a bit more prepared.

Instead of drawing another weapon, he shot himself forward and slapped her across the face with his clenched fist, hilt still in tow. She had not been expecting that at all, and cried out in pain as his fist slammed into her bald head, sending her sprawling in midair.

Her focus was on maintaining her flight. She had no choice but to drop her guard.

He raised his shield and with a mighty jab, slammed it down on her with incredibly power. She cried out as she was slammed back to earth, spinning violently in midair.

This was it. Solaire thought, as he drew his next weapon. A small, easy to carry axe. One last strike...

He zoomed downward, as fast as he could towards her, trying to get close enough to finish her off for good.

She suddenly stopped spinning in midair and faced him, her hands outstretched. His eyes widened as he just barely managed to raise his shield as the intense beam of energy burst out from her, slamming straight into him. He grimaced as the energy hit him, slowing his descent. He adjusted his shield, focusing his own power into it, and the wave of energy began to split apart.

He slowly made his forward, before suddenly the beam stopped.

He lowered his shield. Morana had disappeared. He looked around, trying to find a trace of her, but there was nothing.

He half expected her to pop up behind him, but she never did. She had fled, possibly to the ground below. Where her master awaited.

The situation was spiraling out of control. If what Morana had said was true, the very planet itself had turned against them.

The ground shook again, this time much more violently. The trees surrounding the area that had died fell over, breaking into pieces. In the distance, he could see that other trees were starting to wither and die.

This would have to be ended quickly.

He soared downward, his eyes running over the landscape, trying to rationalize just where she had gone. The grass on the ground was withering and dying. There did not seem to be any place to hide.

And then he spotted her. Standing right where he had first found her. She had spread her arms wide.

“Come forth, master!” She called. “Come into your new body!”

The ground shook again, again much more violently. Despite being in midair, Solaire could feel the sheer force of the quake. The ground seemed to shudder and move about, up and down... like the waves of the ocean.

It was unsettling to see. Buildings in the colony would be torn apart. Magical barriers could do nothing to prevent a natural disaster of this magnitude. The very earth itself was tearing itself apart and changing into something else.

He landed by Morana, his axe at the ready. He threw it, causing it to spin in midair. Morana flicked her wrist, causing it to fly to the side and into the ground. He was striding toward her now, his next weapon at the ready... a spear. He jabbed it at her, and despite the distance between them, it seemed to stretch out farther than it should.

“That will not work, human!” She snapped. She waved her hand and the spear curled backward among itself, rolling into a little ball.

He adjusted his grip on the thing, now useless, and threw it at her. She blasted it away with a magical blast, glaring intently at him. He drew his next weapon, another sword, and began to charge straight at her.

But the ground underneath shook again.

He almost lost his balance entirely. He staggered, before instinctively taking flight again to regain his bearings. Morana, however, took the opportunity to strike.

She was there, right next to him and a blast of upward energy sent his helmet flying off into the sky. She raised her hands, and two claw like fingers went straight for his eyes, trying to claw them out.

The gem on his armor glowed brilliantly, blinding her, and she flinched, recoiling slightly. He thrust his head onto hers with a fierce headbutt, sending her tumbling to the ground, onto her knee.

Now!

He lashed out with his sword, slicing at her neck. She cried as her head was severed completely from her body. It rolled across the ground, like a child's ball, before coming to a sudden stop.

He lowered his weapon, staring intently at the head. It lay still for a while, staring vacantly at him, before it started to laugh.

It floated upward to eye level. "Thought you killed me, did you?" She asked. "How naïve."

It- he could not bear to call it a she anymore... laughed shrilly.

The body reached out, clutching his leg with its claw. He looked down at it and with a mighty stomp, crushed the arm with his other foot. He had been so surprised by the body's sudden movement that he completely forgot about the detached, floating head.

It raced to his face, its powerful jaws open wide, and bit down hard onto his nose. He let out a roar of pain as it clenched down on his nose, tearing it to shreds. His nose tore off his face entirely. He reached up and slapped it aside. It bounced on the ground and rolled away from him. He raised his finger and a beam of energy burst forth, blowing the remains of the head away into pieces.

He placed a hand to his head, and just as suddenly as it been removed, the nose regrew. As if nothing had ever happened. He kicked aside the broken body of the witch, instead focusing his attention on the task remaining.

It was nothing like any other summoning circle: It was comprised of symbols that would take several masters years to design. It made him feel sick. This event had been planned for a very long time.

The Earth shook again, but Solaire was more prepared this time. He did not panic as he rose off the ground, observing the circle.

If the beast had already been summoned, there would be no point in undoing the magic. The only thing he could do now was kill it.

His gaze fell from the circle to the ground itself. It was rippling, much more so now.

"A spirit powerful enough to possess the planet itself..." He murmured. His armor glowed again. "I will need to perform an exorcism."

He knew how to commit exorcisms, of course, but to perform one on such a large scale would be something else entirely. But, despite the clear severity of the situation, he had no idea where to even begin.

"You have already lost, Solaire."

He looked to the side. The head had reformed itself again, reattaching itself to the body. The Witch stood in front of him, looking a little ruffled, but still very much alive.

"What does it take to kill you?" Solaire asked.

She laughed. "Death itself cannot stop me." She claimed. "It has been a long time since I could be considered a mere mortal."

"A long time." Solaire repeated, as he gripped his sword. "Too long, I would think..."

The ground shook again. Morana laughed. Her appearance was improving. Her ability to heal herself was unbelievable.

It did not matter how she was doing it. He would have to find a way to defeat her as well. He could not have her distracting him during such a critical period.

Morana stepped closed to him, staring intently at his face. "Do you see now, human?" She asked. "You cannot possibly win here today. You are no match for us."

Again, the ground shook. Cracks began to form in the earth underneath them, splitting the ground into several different parts. Something was rising out of the ground.

He could not focus on that now. The creature.... Whatever it was.... Could not be killed easily. He needed to take out Morana first. Then he could focus on her master.

He got into a fighting stance and eyed Morana warily. She giggled, readying herself as well. "Oh, ready to kill me again, are you?" She asked. "Many men have tried..."

He grimaced, as he readied his sword. The head had been destroyed. He was sure of that. But it had come back. How could he keep her down?

Something burst out from underneath the ground. Solaire could not help it. He jolted his head to look at it.

It was indescribable. A large, solid eye was staring at him from the crack in the ground. He stared at it, unable to make out just what the eye belonged to, before Morana sent another beam of energy his way.

He could do nothing but take it. His armor shone brightly again, absorbing the powerful blast into its chest plate. He winced at the sheer force of energy that passed through him. But it was far from a lethal blow.

Morana stared at him. "Your armor is interesting indeed." She said. "I have never seen any other armor that can absorb magic that way."

The armor glowed again, and the beam shot back out at her, at full force. Surprised, Morana raised her hand, slapped it aside, upward, into the sky. It soared into the distance and out of sight. "Very interesting." She said. "But not enough, I'm afraid..."

The ground beneath them gave way entirely. The thing underneath the ground pushed upward, causing dust to rise into the air around them, clouding the area.

It was a giant, human shaped head. Strangely adorned, it stared vacantly around the area as if it were not able to make any sense of it. Its mouth was wide open.

"He has risen!" Morana proclaimed, triumphant.

The ground shook again. More cracks began to form in the ground all around and more appendages burst from the ground. More than a dozen arms burst out from underground, waving violently in midair in all matter of directions, their powerful hands slapping down several trees with considerably little effort.

The head closed its mouth, as if composing itself, and focused on the two fighters beneath them. Solaire, unintimidated, stared back at it, considering the situation.

It's one eye adjusted slightly and stared down at them. It did not seem to need to blink.

"Master!" Morana cried, as she floated up to it near eye level. "We cannot hesitate. We must bring ruin to the old world as soon as possible!"

It stared at her intently. And then looked at Solaire.

"I will deal with him, Master." She said. "Focus on gathering your strength."

The head tilted backward, towards the sky, and opened its mouth wide.

A red-hot substance began erupted from it, shooting upward into the sky. Solaire pulled away, flinching. The heat could be felt even from where he was standing, even with his armor blocking off the worst of it. His face was sweating within moments.

"Your world will, in time, be burned away by fire." Morana said, turning to face him. She smiled again. "Everything you have built will be..."

He flew toward her, furiously swiping at her with his sword. She avoided each attack and with a powerful kick, lashed back. He took the blow, wincing a little, and grabbed hold of her leg.

"Take this!"

He reached his other hand forward and jabbed at her stomach. She winced, as his hand twisted into her.

"It's over." He said.

She stared at him. At first she seemed a little confused, but after a couple of seconds passed her upper body collapsed amongst itself, bending over backwards so far that her head touched the back of her legs. She fell into the Abyss below.

He pulled his hand back, wondering whether that was enough to finish her. He doubted it.

He faced the monstrous creature and its many arms, all of which were waving back and forth. It did not seem to notice what had happened at all.

Maybe it would notice this.

"Haaaaaa..."

His armor glinted again. It took in both his magic and the sunlight surrounding him and converted it into something he could use as a weapon.

He roared as he darted forward, his power surrounding him. He became a flashing missile moving at an incredible speed.

He blew straight through the creature, using nothing more than his own body, and shot through to the other side.

He turned around as the creature roared in pain. The fire spurting from its mouth ceased and it rotated around to face them.

"A tough guy, are you?" Solaire asked. "How about another?"

The hands surrounding him began to close in on him, and he darted out of the way. His armor had to take in more energy. Another burst like that right away would exhaust him. He had no choice but to fly in between its fingers, avoiding being crushed, like an overgrown fly.

They kept swatting at him, one after the other. He found it hard to focus on his next attack when this thing was doing everything in its

power to try and slap at him.

The ground shook again and the cracks deepened. But he could not that distract him. The head needed to be taken out. No matter how many more hands rose out of the ground, he would need to attack it again.

He had gotten it to stop spitting fire last time. Now it was time to end it.

He began gather energy again. The being, noticing this, quickly brought its hands in front of him to block it.

It did not matter. He tore through each hand as if they were nothing, and once more dug into the head.

This time, however, he stopped, looking around intently. He had not noticed last time, due to all the fire and the speed he had been going at, but the shape inside seemed to be completely different then what you would find in a living creature. It looked almost like the inside of a cave. He stared downward. The pit below seemed to go on for miles.

He placed his hands together. "Begone, evil spirit!" He cried. Bright white lights appeared in his hands, and he placed them against the stone.

The beast roared. More fire rose from the Abyss, trying to burn him to cinders, but once again he protected himself by erecting a barrier around him as the fire faded, he made his next move.

"Begone, Evil spirit!" He raced downwards, trailing his hands along the side of the wall. The white light leaving a bright, glowing trail where his hands had been.

The beast shuddered. Small stones began to fall to pieces both above and below him, collapsing amongst themselves.

"Begone evil spirit!"

He raced back upward again, his hands now on the other side of the beast. A deep groan of pain came from it.

"Begone!"

He pulled away, slapping his hands together. A pulse of energy burst forth.

The marks he left behind began to shine even more brilliantly, and the creature let out an audible scream.

"Begone, spirit!" Solaire cried. "You do not belong in this world!"

The rocks around him began to crumble apart. Solaire knocked away the boulders above him with his hand, clearing the way as he soared up and out of the remains of the beast.

The sunlight hitting his skin felt wonderful. His armor had not been able to recharge properly while within the beast, so he took the time to allow it to regenerate.

"You..."

He looked down. Morana had crawled out of the pit. She looked battered and bruised, but still very much alive, but more filthy and ragged than ever. Dirt clunk to her nails and her eyes were wide and crazed

"This is not the end!" She rasped, as she crawled to him, slowly. Solaire stared at her, impassively, as she crept closer.

"It is indeed." Solaire said.

He swooped down on her and kicked at her face. She went sprawling on the ground, rolling several times before coming to a stop. Solaire set foot on the ground again. "I gave you a chance to surrender, and you refused." He said, as he strode toward her. "You only live now because your powers were phenomenal."

He bent over and picked her up, lifting her off the ground. Her face was bruised and broken. She looked even uglier than when they had started.

"I see your spine hasn't grown back." He said. "Interesting."

The woman groaned in pain. Even though he had specifically tried to cripple her, and succeeded, she had gotten back up anyway. She must have been propping herself up using magic. Her legs hung limply in the air, unable to move.

"You can recover from ordinary injuries... but not from my Umbran power." He noted. His eyes narrowed. "I suppose I'll have to kill you by using it, then."

She punched at him, weakly. He rose his fingers upward, pointed threateningly at her.

"You have brought this on yourself, monster." He said. "You don't belong in this world."

He jabbed her chest. A couple of seconds later and her heart was no more.

She flinched, and flopped over, into his hand. He tossed her body down and watched it intently, wondering if she was down for good this time.

Minutes passed. Five. Ten. Fifteen. In all that time, she did not move at all.

He sighed. Even now, he was not entirely sure that she wouldn't just leap back up and start fighting again. He wouldn't be satisfied until the body was burned.

"It's over." He said.

Behind him, someone clapped.

He sighed again, his eyes not leaving the body of his opponent.

"Hello, Callisto." He said.

He had been there for quite some time, but he came out from where he had been standing anyway. He did not stop clapping until he reached Solaire's side. "Fantastic fight, sir." He said, smiling.

"Fantastic fight indeed. The Master is very pleased."

"I can imagine." Solaire muttered. "I never would have thought someone like this would try and come here and to do something so

insane.”

“There are all matter of people out there, Solaire.” Callisto told him. “All of whom hate us and want us gone. Why, even Ciela- ”

“About the girls...” Solaire’s unease about the whole situation took hold. “Are they all alright?”

“Yes.” Callisto said. “Every single one. Even the Monster Hunter, Selene.”

Solaire smiled, relieved. “I’m very glad to hear that.” He said. “Were they the ones who fought the other witches?”

“Most of them.” He said. “I-I myself had to step in and destroy Calanthe, however.”

“Did you really?” Solaire asked. He was disappointed to hear that. “I’m sorry.”

“No... no, it’s fine.” Callisto coughed, waving his hand dismissively. “It... it had to be done, after all.” He looked very troubled. Solaire’s heart ached. He knew how hard it was for him to let his true nature take charge. “I’m just glad none of my cousins had to step in as well.”

Solaire was thankful it did not have to come to that.

“Yes, we are very fortunate indeed.” Solaire said. “The girls bought us the time we needed for the sun to rise.”

“They really are something, aren’t they?” Callisto asked. “We chose well.”

“You chose well.” Solaire told him, teasing him. Callisto grinned.

“For once.” He said. “I think we really need to start thinking about making this whole thing official. They need to play a bigger part in helping us with our goals. Anita has done a ton for us already, and Ciela is, I think it goes without saying, the strongest woman in the world right now.”

“But Marionetta and Selene...”

"Marionetta has grown a lot." Callisto assured him. "I've been watching her. She wants to step up and start helping the colony grow. And Selene... well, I think we set the spark to get her to leave the city tonight."

"Good." Solaire muttered, as he bent over and gingerly picked up Morana's body. Now that she was stiff and cold, he saw no reason not to show her proper respect. "We will need the all the strength we can muster in the coming months."

The sun was lovely today, and very warm and pleasant, but he had no time to relax. There was lots of work to do.

...

Anita half expected the earthquakes to start up again, even more furiously then before. She bent over Ciela, her focus never wavering from her friend's well-being. Marionetta was not far away. She was sitting in a ball, her hands wrapped around her legs. She was shaking.

Only Selene seemed completely at ease. "Whatever was happening is over now." She said. Several minutes ago, they had thought that maybe that the eruption of red energy stopping was a good sign, but Selene was quick to stomp on that idea. But it seemed that, somehow, she knew the situation had changed.

"So someone took care of it..." Anita muttered. "Why could they have not stepped in sooner?"

"The sun wasn't out, remember?" Marionetta asked quietly. "The Suns of the Son couldn't do anything..."

"Brilliant plan." Anita said sarcastically. "Equip all your men with weapons that are only practical in broad daylight." Her frustration with Ciela's condition was making her extremely irritable. "I still cannot believe this colony has gone as long as it has without an official militia." She went on to say. "We should never have had to step in. The situation should have been under control before it ever really got out of hand."

"Anita..."

Marionetta gave her a sympathetic look. She said nothing else, but Anita understood all too well. She could not let her emotions ruin her. Not now, not after they had already won.

She focused her attention back to Ciela, who had still not woken up. "If it really is over..." She said. "We need to get her to safety. A bed may not be much, but it's certainly better than just having her lay on the ground."

"How are we going to do that?" Marionetta asked quietly. "Just wait for someone to come get us?"

"I suppose so." Anita said. "Selene, is there any way you could get in touch with your people?"

"People?" Selene repeated. "I have no 'people.'"

"You have Tomoko..." Marionetta pointed out.

"Tomoko?" Selene repeated. "What could she do for us?"

They talked for a little while longer about what the plan was going to be, until at last, the sound of an engine filled the air.

"A car?" Anita murmured, unable to believe their luck. "Quick... go flag whoever it is down."

There was no need, however. The car was headed straight toward them. It was a familiar looking car, too...

It rolled to a stop right by their side. The window rolled down, revealing the driver.

"Morning, ladies." Callisto said. "Need a ride?"

"Callisto!" Anita said. She had never been so happy to see him.

His eyes darted over all of them, before suddenly falling on Ciela. His expression twisted from friendly amicability to distraught. "Ciela... what happened to her?"

The door burst open and Callisto fell out, so anxious to be by her side that he tripped mid motion. He scrambled across the ground, hands and feet pushing him forward, before he reached her. He knelt, his gaze wide, as he took her hand.

Anita's medical instincts roared at her to ask him to step back, but she understood completely how he was feeling. "Please step away, sir." She said formally. "I am doing all I can to save her."

Callisto nodded, still looking a little anguished, as he pulled away from her. Anita had never been particularly close to Callisto, as she tended to shy away from Ciela's boyfriends out of principle, but even she had to admit that she was very impressed with how well he was conducting himself.

She turned her attention back to caring for Ciela. "It is fantastic that you came when you did." She said. "We were just discussing just how to transport Ciela back to safety."

"Safety?" Callisto repeated. "The fighting is over, isn't it?"

"It is." Selene confirmed. He looked at her, surprised.

"That's great!" He said. "Well..."

He looked down at Ciela again. "Is she going to be okay?" He asked. His voice was soft and tender.

Anita had to lie to him. She could not have him panic, as he was the only one of them who knew how to drive. "She will be fine." She told him. "We just need her to rest. And for me to be at her side."

She was not willing to admit it, but the day's events had made her exhausted. But she had to stay awake and alert: she had to take charge. Ciela was depending on her. She had no one else.

Callisto nodded. "Yes... I see." He said. "Can we move her into the car?"

The three of them, Marionetta, Anita, and Callisto all helped to carefully drag Ciela inside without disturbing her too greatly. Selene

stood at a distance away, not helping in the slightest. Anita glared at her, but she did not acknowledge it.

Finally, Ciela was lodged snugly into the backseat, her Anita's lap. She had to stay very close to her to continue treating her wounds. On Ciela's other side was Marionetta, who was looking very cramped. And Selene...

"What are you doing?" Callisto asked, as she crawled up on top of the roof. She gave no answer, only little scratches along the metal. Callisto groaned. Marionetta giggled, in spite of the situation, causing Anita to roll her eyes. Unbelievable...

The car set off, but very slowly, at Anita's request. She did not want any surprise bumps or turns to make her lose her grip on Ciela. Selene, however, seemed a bit more uneasy. She kept banging on the roof, as if encouraging them to go faster.

"She's a bit of a wild one, isn't she?" Callisto commented. He was trying to make light hearted conversation. He was trying to calm himself down, Anita observed. He was trying to distract himself from the fact that his girlfriend might die in the back of his car.

She was not sure what to make of that. Not at all.

"Quiet." She said. "I need to focus." Callisto stiffened, before giving a single nod.

...

Ciela shuddered, coughing violently. Her vision was blurry. Where was she? How had she gotten here? ... who was she? She shifted in place, vaguely aware that she was tucked snugly into a bed.

"Ciela."

She blinked, her vision clearing a little. She smiled, despite herself. "Hey, you." She said. "My hair... doesn't look too messed up, does it?"

He laughed. It was a pleasant, happy sound.

"No, no, you look fine." He told her. He reached forward and brushed her hair back with his hand. "You're not a corpse, at any rate."

"Hmm..." She barely registered what he had said. She was drifting off again.

Callisto sat with her, deep in thought as he looked down at her face.

"Hello."

He looked up. Anita was standing there in the door, looking slightly irritable.

"What's the matter?" He asked.

She stepped inside, and a wide variety of things floated in midair after her. Packaged boxes, flowers, get well cards, stuffed animals...

Callisto could not help but laugh at the sight. "More tokens?" He asked. "Here, maybe I should..." He got up and reached for the nearest box, trying to decide on where he should place all this stuff.

"Has there been any change at all?" Anita asked, ignoring his gesture. She set the presents at the end of the bed, where an already sizable portion of untouched goods lay in wait.

"She spoke." He told her. "It's an improvement."

Anita was very relieved. She smiled, looking down at her. "I told you she would be fine." She said. "See? Do not worry yourself any longer."

It had been several days since the fighting had concluded. The monsters, those that remained, anyway, had been quickly vanquished by the Sons of the Sun. In broad daylight, the creatures were no match for them. At night, the people were snugly waited in various shelters in wait for the next day to begin.

The issue had been resolved almost as quickly as it had popped up.

"Was she coherent?"

"Huh?"

"Did what she said make any sense?"

"Oh... yes."

"Good." Anita said, looking pleased. "She is well on the way to recovery, then..."

She checked her patient over again, nodding faintly, as if she were trying to reassure herself. "Yes, yes, she will be fine." She said. "The worst has passed, thankfully. As long as she never does it again."

She shot Callisto a look. "The last time I asked her to not do anything stupid, she laughed and made no promises." She said. "She ignored me. I hope you have better luck."

She turned and walked out, swishing her cloak behind her.

...

Anita found Tomoko and Selene not long after that.

"Okay, what do you want to hear next?"

The crowd around them, mostly little children, but some older boys as well, started offering up suggestions. Tomoko smiled and laughed at the flurry of words coming to them, bouncing her guitar up and down on her leg.

"Okay, okay, slow down." She said. "Something quick, then?"

"I don't do quick." Selene hissed, looking annoyed. "Really..."

The crowd, despite her words, drowned out her complaints. No, no, Selene. You can do it, please! You must!

"The crowd has spoken, Selene." Tomoko told her smugly. "You best better learn how."

Selene shook her head, unsmiling. "Very well." She said at last. "But this is the last time, understand?"

She stood up, leaving her lyre on the ground behind her. "But you will lead."

"Yes, yes..." Tomoko said patiently. She strummed a chord. The crowd fell silent.

And then Selene began to sing.

The sound that came from her was both incredibly lovely and soothing, but also with a bit of an edge. The words that came from her lips spoke of bizarre things that Anita could not even understand, but something about it moved her. She felt more aggressive, alert, and excited.

And then just like that, it was over.

"That's it." Selene said finally. Tomoko stopped playing, frowning at her. Anita had not even noticed the sound of the guitar over Selene's voice. "Pack up. Go home, leave me alone."

She bent over, picking up her lyre.

The crowd did not disperse, at least not right away. The kids, seeing that the show was over, went their own separate ways, but the boys stuck around. Or at least, stuck around Selene.

"So what's with the mask?"

Tomoko was sitting by herself some distance away, looking a little annoyed. She noticed Anita, and waved her over. Anita did so, trying to ignore the sound of half a dozen boys trying to get Selene's attention.

"She wouldn't perform at all if it weren't for me." Tomoko sniffed. "Honestly..."

That didn't make you some sort of legendary musician. Anita thought. Selene's voice was something else entirely. She strongly suspected that Tomoko was merely jealous.

"Yes, I have a voice." Selene said to the boys showering her with compliments. "Most people do..."

"She's so ungrateful." Tomoko complained. "She has such great talent, but she's not interested in performing seriously at all."

Anita did not particularly care for this line of conversation. She was quick to try and change it. "I hope your fans aren't going to be too upset when you leave."

"You mean HER fans." She said, scowling. "I'm sure they will be. They always are, but- "

"I never said I was going anywhere."

Selene had pushed her way through the crowd and come to stand by them. She looked a little uncomfortable. The boys followed along, all of whom were looking very put out about how she had blown them off.

"Girl talk." Anita told them, flipping her hand at them. "Shoo, shoo."

"We'll be back tomorrow!" Tomoko said hurriedly, as they turned away. "We'll be glad to see you then! ... And I'll actually talk to you!"

They seemed a little bit placated by this and left in much higher spirits.

"Children, boys... I hate them all." Selene spat. "Bah, why do I put up with this..."

"Because I asked nicely!" Tomoko said cheerfully, her voice sing song. "Anything to keep people from realizing how creepy you can be."

"Hmph."

"You have a wonderful voice." Anita told her. "I did not realize you were musical."

She was being genuine, but Selene just scoffed. "You too?"

Tomoko placed a hand on Selene's shoulder. "Ignore her, Anita." She said firmly. "She doesn't know how to handle compliments."

"I can imagine." Anita replied dryly. She was deeply offended. She never offered empty praise.

"Anyway." Tomoko coughed, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction. "Um, Selene... what were you saying... about not

going anywhere?"

"I am bored of sitting in the city, waiting for something to happen." She said. "This colony... it is much more appealing to me." She tilted her head upward, sniffing the air. "The air is cleaner, there are more things to do, and I rather enjoy the quiet at night."

"Huh?" Tomoko frowned. "Really?" She looked kind of surprised for a moment, before crossing her arms. "I kind of feel the same way, admittedly." She said. "I mean, the boys here are soooo much cuter than the ones back home..." She shook her head. "But I don't think we can justify doing that." She said. "I mean, what would we do here? You're not cut out for a regular job."

"I never said I would stop fighting." Selene said. "I just think my talents would be better served here, in the colony. Not playing Zookeeper for a bunch of incompetent fools."

"Yeah, but... who will pay us?" Tomoko asked. "I mean, you can't just decide to move to the middle of nowhere and not have a real plan."

"I am sure Solaire would be willing to accommodate you." Anita said. "I am quite happy with what I earn doing odd jobs for the Colony."

"I don't do odd jobs." Selene sniffed. "I am better than that."

"I'm sure we can find SOMETHING." Tomoko said quickly. "Uh, let's talk to Solaire though, first, before we make any decisions, okay?"

Selene nodded. "Yes, I understand." She said. "I need food, after all."

"Speaking of food..." Tomoko turned back to Anita. "How's the restaurant doing?"

"Luna just reopened, actually." Anita said. "Ciela may wake up later today... how about we all go once she does?"

"Yeah!" Tomoko clapped her hands together, smiling. "It sounds like fun!"

"As long as the food is good..." Selene said.

"It always is." Anita assured her. "Luna just asked me to make sure everyone showed up."

"Everyone?" Selene repeated. "You mean to tell me she hasn't fed me yet because Ciela couldn't make it?"

"Yes, that's exactly what she means." Tomoko said, exasperated. "I mean, Ciela did take out one of the Witches all by herself."

"So did I." Selene said stubbornly. "I should have been fed first."

"We'll get you something to eat." Tomoko said, her voice exasperated. "I think that poolside cook out is still going on... want to drop by?"

"Hmm." Selene muttered, clearly intrigued. "They better have plenty of meat."

"Would you like to come with us, Anita?" Tomoko asked. She leaned in closer and observed the lines under Anita's eyes. "You could use some more rest."

She had been spending most of her free time by Ciela's bedside. She was possibly her second most frequent bedside companion... second only to Callisto.

"No, I must hurry back- "

"No." Tomoko said firmly, grabbing her arm. "Ciela is on the road to recovery, remember? You need to unwind, girl. You look terrible."

Did she really look that bad? Perhaps that was why Rose Karuma had not come for her yet... She wondered whether she should start carrying a mirror around with her to tidy up when she was out and about.

"If you think I look that bad, maybe I should..."

"Oh, you look dreadful." Tomoko assured her, tightening her grip. "Come on!"

...

The pool that Calanthe had built for herself stood out as one of the very few changes that the Witch Invasion had brought. It was clean, perfectly usable, and had several spells in place to make maintaining it a snap. Apparently Calanthe was going to wait out the Apocalypse at poolside.

"Hey!"

Rolf was standing some distance away, with a spatula in his hand. He waved them away to the grill. He wasn't wearing a shirt, Anita noticed. Tomoko was blushing furiously.

"Uh, hey, you." Tomoko sputtered. She raised her hand and pushed Selene backwards behind her, trying to keep her out of sight. Selene scowled, but obliged. "What's shaking?"

This girl was worse than Ciela. Anita thought in disgust as Tomoko and Rolf talked. She laughed at everything he said, regardless of how funny it was and twirled her hand through her hair, brushing it gently. Despite her charms, Rolf only seemed to have eyes for Selene.

"Have you eaten yet?" Rolf asked her.

Selene tilted her head. "Not yet." She said. "But I would like to, yes. Thank you."

Tomoko scowled.

She wasn't the only person upset. Marionetta was sitting on a floaty couch on the water, looking aghast at what she was seeing.

Come on. Anita thought, annoyed. If it bothers you so much you can do something about it.

The water underneath Marionetta began to shift violently. Marionetta squeaked as she was thrown backwards, into the water. It burst upward, sending her tumbling out of the pool, sliding across the ground towards them. She shrieked as she slid to a stop in front of them, soaking wet.

She looked up at Rolf in horror. "What- what..."

"What was that?" Rolf asked, looking amazed. "Anita, did you do that?"

"Of course I did." Anita said smugly. "I think Marionetta has something she wants to say."

Marionetta squeaked in horror. A few seconds passed and then she began to shake her head furiously. "N-no." She said. "I don't know what you're-you're talking about."

This girl was hopeless. Maybe if she kidnapped Rolf, that would get her to woman up.

Anita was considering how best to approach the issue when a strong pair of arms wrapped around her. Shrieking, she punched and kicked at her assailant as she was carried over to the pool. She was tossed inside, and she came down with a mighty splash.

She rose out of the water, sputtering, eyeing Rolf with an intense fury. "What was that for, human?" She asked.

"For bullying Marionetta." He said casually, leaning over the side to stare at her. "Wasn't very nice to do that."

She leapt up out of the pool and wrapped her arms around Rolf's head. He tried to pull away, but her ability to fly allowed her to drag him back in with her. He yelled as they slammed back into the water together.

They rose as one, sputtering. "Oh, now you're asking for it!"

He splashed her with his hand, catching her full in the face. She growled, splashing him back. "I have you now, foolish boy!"

The other girls watched as Rolf and Anita fought each other in the pool, swimming laps around each other.

"Awkward." Tomoko said, eyeing Anita's robe, which was clinging to her skin. "That isn't exactly what I would call a cute swimsuit."

"I find it more amusing that the both of you lost your man to a Rose Witch of all things." Selene observed.

Tomoko and Marionetta glared at her, and then at each other. "Yeah, that is pretty embarrassing." Tomoko said, after a brief pause.

"They're supposed to be... magic virgins or something."

"Celibate. The word is celibate." Marionetta said. "She needs to keep herself pure for her future master."

"She's not doing a very good job, is she?" Selene asked. She seemed surprisingly interested in the proceedings. "She acts as if she is having fun down there..."

Marionetta paled.

Selene took the spare spatula from the grill and prodded the meat. It looked very well done at this point. "You best shape up, Marionetta." She advised her. "He isn't going to be there forever, you know..."

Tomoko huffed. "Why are you giving her advice?" She asked. "You should be on MY side!"

...

Ciela stiffened. Callisto leaned forward again. "Hey." He said quietly. "You still with us?"

Ciela nodded. "Yeah..." She said. She reached out and touched her face. "Did I ever tell you that I'm in love with you?"

"Only every day." He replied, amused. "Is anything wrong with you?"

"Everything's wrong with me." She huffed, taking in a deep breath of air. She tried moving her feet. "Everything feels sore and useless."

His smile faded. "I see." He said. "Your injuries are serious. Aren't they?"

The room became very quiet.

"Callisto." She said. "I didn't mean to make you worry. But I could not let that monster defeat me- "

He placed a finger on her lips. "Hush." He said. "It's all right. I understand."

She smiled. "You're the best." She said. "Anita made me promise to never use it again... did you hear?"

"Yes, she told me." He said. "She's not happy with you."

She managed to rasp out something that sounded like a laugh.

"Okay." She said. "I can imagine that."

She fell silent again. Callisto did not press her to continue the conversation. She seemed to merely be thinking.

"Callisto. Who killed Calanthe?"

He gave her a look. "Solaire, of course." He said. "Who else?"

She nodded, as if that was about what she had expected. "Of course he did." She said. She sounded bitter. "He takes out their leader and one of their most powerful fighters without a scratch on him, and I could barely take out one with everything I had."

Her hands twitched. She imagined that if she could move them that they would be balled into fists.

"Even defeating one Witch of that caliber is a feat in and of itself."

He said. "From what I understand, you are now the Chun-Li... the undisputed strongest woman in the world. There's no shame in that."

"What good is strength if I still can't take out every obstacle that comes my way?" She asked, upset. "Really, Callisto..."

"If it was easy fighting at your level, anyone could do it." He told her.

"Don't worry about it."

But she was worrying. She had worried about little else besides while she lay here.

"I want to be stronger." She said at last. "I may be the Chun-Li, but... there are still people out there who can beat me."

Her hand slowly, painfully, curled into a fist. Despite all the pain and suffering she had been through, she was still as determined as ever to succeed.

"My dream is to overthrow the Dracula." She said. "Callisto.... I know we haven't known each other all that long, but please understand that this is my dream. This is what I want to do with my life, and you... I would understand if you wouldn't want anything to do with me anymore." She took in a deep breath. "I want to get even stronger." She said. "Training is long, and hard, and difficult, and takes time. I may not be there for you the way you've been there for me the past few days- "

He stopped her again, this time by taking her hand. "Taking out the Dracula?" He asked. "A lofty goal indeed. And in a way... that's what I like most about you. You never shy away from adventure, do you?" He looked down at her with bright, warm eyes. "Ciela... I will help you fight the Dracula." He said. "I don't care how long it takes, I don't care how hard it's going to be for both of us. But I want you, from the bottom of my heart, to succeed."

She froze. Her mouth felt very, very dry.

"I love you." He said.

And in that moment, she knew that she would be his forever.

END